The Gallows

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The Gallows

by gillianeliza

Summary

Five years after the Battle of Hogwarts the Ministry of Magic has one more wizard to bring to trial: Draco Malfoy. However, it's not a trial they're after, it's a spectacle to celebrate the end of the Death Eater regime with the execution of their final prisoner. When Hermione realizes their plan, she halts the trial and invokes The Gallows Law — an ancient law that pardons any pureblood male without an heir if a witch will marry him.

What Hermione isn't ready for is the reality of bonding a broken, shell of a wizard and her new life as she moves into Malfoy Manor as the new Lady Malfoy.

Notes

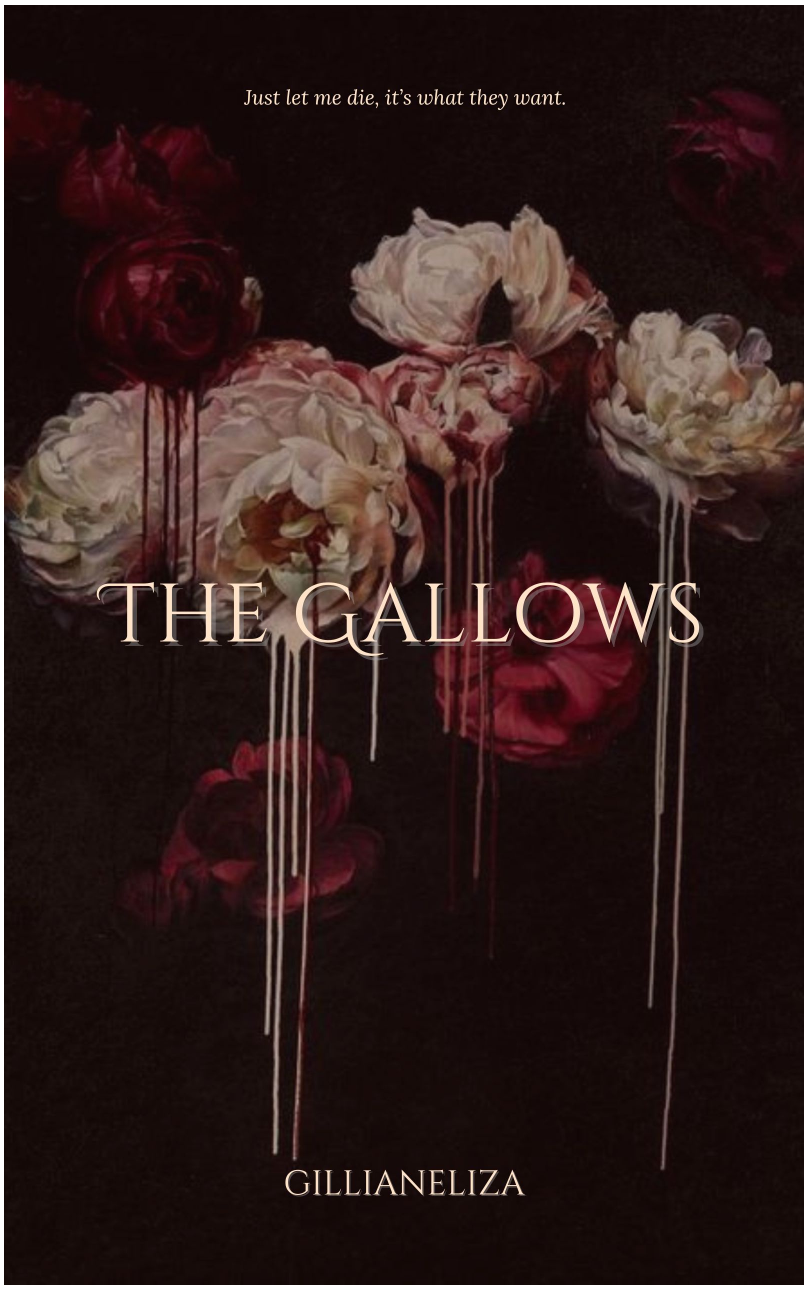
Hello my loves! I'm back with what very well might be my final dramione fic. The idea for the basic premise of this fic came from a TikTok prompt I saw a few months ago & couldn't get out of my head. This story is incredibly close to my heart as it allowed me to navigate my own personal experience as both a caregiver and person in need of care. Please mind the tags as this story deals heavily with suicidal ideation, death, and grief.

You can find me on IG.

This fic is now complete.

As a reminder, this fic was written as a gift from me to you. Please **do not put it on Goodreads**. You can find all my policies including binding and translations here. But as quick rundown: *I do not allow translations of my work, only allow hand-crafted binds for personal use, & any transformative works such as audio fics must be approved by me.*

Chapter 1



"You have five minutes, Miss Granger."

Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat. Dementors hadn't inhabited Azkaban for years and yet she thought she could still feel their chill, the sickly rotting of a hand curling around her throat. Was that a deep breath she took, or was it the ghost of their past coming to haunt her?

The guard stood beside the open door, so thick no one would have been able to blast through it even if they did have possession of a wand. A chill breeze swept back the loose curls

framing her face, the scent of salt and brine and rot washing across her tongue.

Five years since the war, five years of the Wizarding World rebuilding what they lost. Of watching Kingsley fight against the purists who still lingered within the cogs of the Ministry. Death Eater after Death Eater had been tried, some freed and others still trapped within the crumbling stone walls of this very prison.

And now there was only one left.

The click of Hermione's heels echoed and she winced, lightening her steps as she crossed the threshold into the cell. A trickle of magic ran down her spine, her own suppressed slightly as a result of the wards, to keep those imprisoned here from building up their strength and casting wandlessly.

She cast her eyes around the room, frowning when she thought it empty. For the last two years she'd worked within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement as an advisor on the trials of the Wizarding World. Mainly she spoke with the victims from the war, believing it was her duty to continue the fight for all those they had lost.

Now, as she scanned the cell, she wondered if she had been foolish to take on such a task. Especially when the pile of rags she'd seen beside the slim window overlooking the roiling sea shifted, a pale hand glimmering in the sunlight running through scraggily, white-blonde hair.

"Hello." Hermione winced again at the quiet, breathiness of her voice, but the wizard before her did not turn her way, only rested his forehead against the stone.

He was thinner than the last time she'd seen his photo in the Prophet. Hair now grown out around his shoulders, the rounded edges of childhood giving way to a razor-sharp profile that could cut through dragonhide. But the hollows beneath his eyes mirrored the darkly stained fabric of his worn prisoner robes, almost the same color as the dark ink running down the side of his throat — a series of runes and numbers that identified him. But Hermione needed no confirmation.

Draco Malfoy sat before her, hollow and lifeless as the cell she stood in. She was not sure if he was even breathing, for she could not see the rise and fall of his chest. Only the slight movement of his irises gave him away and then his tongue swept across his cracked lips. She thought perhaps he might speak, but he only sighed, lifting a trembling, grime covered hand to trace the edge of the thin window.

"I'm," she cleared her throat, "do you have a moment?"

Another wince. He had nothing but moments, nothing but time.

Well… that was not quite true, Draco Malfoy was rapidly running out of it.

When he did not respond, she took a few steps closer, fingers digging into the folder clasped across her chest. In the years that she had imagined Malfoy within Azkaban — admittedly, she did not imagine it often — it had been with a similar air to which he'd paraded around

the castle. There had been rumors of Lucius Malfoy's cell, only a few doors down, lush with rugs and furniture from their manor. He had lived like a king until one day the guards entered his room for his first trial only to find him dead, his morning meal poisoned.

Hermione had assumed Malfoy experienced a similar sort of luxury within Azkaban. But judging by the threadbare mattress atop a lopsided iron frame and bucket in the opposite corner, nothing could be further from the truth. The scent of decay was coming from the cell itself, from the empty trays of food piled in one corner, a steady drip of water sliding down the wall behind it from the constant misting of the ocean. And swirling through it all was the scent of what was unmistakably months or even years of sweat and grime and fear. She knew it well enough from their time on the run — but at least she and Harry had their wands and the occasional stream to wash.

"Your trial begins this afternoon and I'm here to discuss a few arguments I've prepared," Hermione tried again, taking a step closer. She was wrong, she realized. His eyes were no longer silver, but merely a lifeless gray.

Malfoy did not reply, only continued to trace a crack in the stone with the jagged nail of his index finger, the sleeve of his robe falling back enough to expose one bony wrist, and the shadow of the dark mark now mottled beneath layers of scars.

Well… if there was one thing Hermione enjoyed it was a captive audience. And yet, the moment she thought it, she winced again at the poor joke. But she drew the folder from where she clutched it to her chest and began to rifle through the parchment.

"I have written a very compelling argument for your release, all centering around the way in which Vol—"

Malfoy flinched, turning his face to the window, long fingers splayed wide against the stone.

"demort marked you." She took a breath, swallowing back the lump once again rising in her throat and blinked away the heat in the corners of her eyes. "I believe that…"

Hermione fell into her explanation. How Malfoy had been marked when he had still been underage and obviously under coercion. Malfoy had been forced to attempt to end the life of Albus Dumbledore with the understanding that his failure meant his parent's executions. The list went on and on. The ministry had checked his wand with *priori incantatem* only to find not a single killing curse had been cast.

The wizard curled on the floor was innocent.

"Therefore I believe if you could—"

"Time's up, Miss Granger," the guard called, the door swinging open and allowing in a rush of fresh air.

With a sigh, she gathered up the parchments arranged within her timeline across the dirt covered floor. "I'll see you in a few hours, Malfoy."

Hermione made it almost through the threshold before a cracked voice slithered through the space, whisper quiet as the wind.

“Just let me die. It’s what they want.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Just let me die.

The words circled Hermione's head, even as she floo'd back to the Ministry. As she picked apart the bagel Harry left on her desk until it was merely crumbs. As she stared at the lifts that went down to the courtrooms, shoulder to shoulder with Harry and Ron fresh from their patrols.

The three were silent as they filed into the courtrooms. Years had taught them to keep to themselves, to be mindful of words spoken aloud in a public place lest they become tomorrow's headline. They were jostled, Harry reaching out to wrap a hand around Hermione's elbow while Ron held her sleeve. It seemed the entirety of Wizarding Britain was attempting to fit themselves within the room, rows and rows of stands filled as if it were the Quidditch World Cup, not a trial.

And with each step, Malfoy's voice whispered in her ear:

Just let me die.

It's what they want.

Just let me die.

It's what they want.

She caught the eye of two wizards making their way slowly up the stands. Theodore Nott was taller than she remembered, the close-cropped curls of his youth now skimming around his ears. Blaise Zabini was no different, his dark skin gleamed in the floating candles, though she thought he might have blanched when their eyes met. And then they turned, following a witch up the stairs to settle into the section traditionally reserved for the family of the accused.

Hermione tried instead to remember the arguments, the counter arguments, the timeline. *He was only a boy. A boy with no choice. Would you have not done the same in his place?* And yet with each breath, she heard him again.

Just let me die.

It's what they want.

"Hermione!" Dean Thomas raised his hand from the first row, pointing to the empty space nestled between him and Seamus.

The three pushed through the crowd, muttering their thanks as they slid onto the bench. Ron leant forward, resting his elbows on the rail and staring down into the empty cage.

“Blimey,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Who do they think he is? You-know-who-junior?”

A muscle ticked in her jaw. He was right — the usual chains for a prisoner’s wrists and ankles were doubled, maybe even tripled. Harry swore under his breath, removing his glasses to polish them on his robes as if the chains were merely a stain on his lenses.

“You didn’t hear?” Dean murmured beneath the crowd, leaning over Hermione to Ron.

“Hear what?” She snapped, pulse ticking higher.

Just let me die.

It’s what they want.

Dean shook his head, running a hand over his hair. “Kingsley’s been in a right state. Turns out this isn’t a trial after all.”

The three frowned at Dean, but it was Harry who spoke first. “What is it then?”

Silence fell around them before he could respond as the Wizengamot filed into the room, led by the Minister for Magic. Kingsley’s face was drawn, the hollows under his eyes rivaling that of Malfoy’s, and Hermione’s stomach twisted painfully.

“It’s a sentencing,” she breathed.

Metal groaned, an ominous clicking filling the room, and all eyes fell on the cage and the head of white-blonde hair ascending from the holding cell beneath. It was Hermione’s turn to lean forward, her eyes widening as Malfoy came into view.

He was the spitting image of his father with his shoulder length hair and almost unrecognizable from the wizard she’d seen that morning, years of dirt and grime scrubbed from his skin until he was as pale as the marble beneath their feet. They had dressed him in the fine robes of his father, down to the black ribbon holding back the majority of his hair.

And it was clear *they* had dressed him, the powers that be who served to make an example out of Malfoy. Those who allowed the blame of the war to rest upon innocent shoulders. Before them was not a wizard, not the accused, merely a doll they had dressed and positioned for their ruse.

The moment the plinth came to a halt, the chains snaked out to clamp over his wrists, his ankles. And they had their answer: the new chains clamped around his elbows, his waist, and his throat.

“Draco Lucius Malfoy.” Kingsley’s voice was slow, resonant, and in it she could hear the regret. “You stand before us a marked Death Eater, responsible for the death of Albus—”

“Fucking hell,” Harry muttered. “What are they playing at?”

Hermione shifted, pain pricking into her palms as she tightened her fists in her skirts. “He is a symbol, Harry, just as you are.”

Bright green eyes turned towards her, a vee forming between his brows. He was the spitting image of James, down to the scruff on his face, but she wondered if the fire in his eyes belonged to Lily.

“The Wizengamot has voted…” Kingsley continued.

“A symbol? What do you mean?”

Hermione shook her head, turning back towards Malfoy. His face was slack, expression fixed to a point on the floor a meter or so away, thumbs running over the tips of his fingers. This was not the boy she’d grown up hating, the boy who swaggered through the halls of Hogwarts with a group of cronies.

“…43 ayes and seven nays to execute by means of hanging from…”

“You were a symbol of hope. Malfoy is a symbol of the brutality the Wizarding World pretends to no longer have.”

“Does the accused have anything they would like to say?” Kingsley finished; attention fixed to the parchment in his hand.

Malfoy did not move, as if he had no awareness of his surroundings. A lock of hair fell from the ribbon at his nape, obscuring the side of his face, but he did not push it back.

Hermione’s heartbeat thrummed louder, magic sparking across her skin. They would execute him as a symbol of the Death Eater regime coming to an end. An innocent man who had been a mere child. It did not matter that Malfoy had lowered his wand when Dumbledore offered him aid, that he never cast the killing curse, that in the final battle he had only tried to protect himself and his friends.

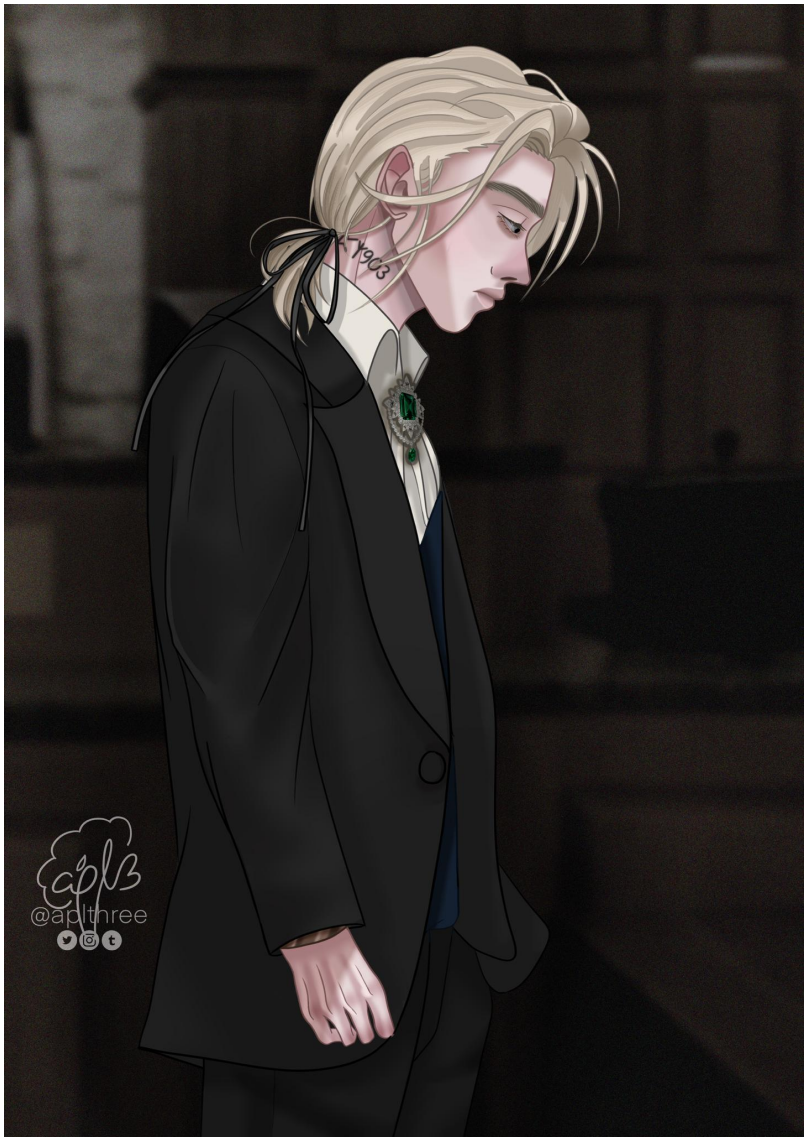
And he had known. That was what he’d meant that morning. She wondered when Malfoy had given up hope of surviving. Had it been when he learned of their plans? Or had it been five years ago when aurors raided Malfoy Manor in the middle of the night… or perhaps even longer ago, the night Voldemort branded the dark mark on his skin.

Too much, it was too much to imagine. Her heart beat against her chest, shaking her ribs like the prison bars surrounding Malfoy until she thought she understood what it meant to have a broken heart. And, without thinking she rose to her feet, ignoring Harry and Ron as they tried to pull her back, shaking off Dean’s grip on her wrist when she shimmed in front of him to the aisle.

Her heels clicked against the shiny marble, echoing in her ears, drowning out the heavy panting breaths of her panic and the murmuring rumbling through the crowd. Each step was a punctuation to the words he’d spoken, to the truth he’d told, to the fate he’d accepted.

Except Hermione could not accept it. She rounded the dais to stand in front of Malfoy's cage, resisting the urge to smooth her hair back or straighten her skirt. Later she would shake her head at her rash action, at the way her emotions allowed her to get carried away. At how logical Hermione Granger could find herself in such a mess. But that was later. That was after her voice rung out across the hall, her fingertips biting into her skin so hard blood welled beneath her nails.

"I, Hermione Jean Granger, invoke the Gallows Law."



Art by [Aplthree](#) thank you so much!

Chapter End Notes

See you next Friday, my loves!

Chapter 3

Through the roar of the crowd, Hermione could have sworn she heard a sharp gasp. But she did not turn to the wizard behind her, merely met Kingsley's horrified gaze.

"Miss Granger," a member of the Wizengamot began, "you cannot—"

"Under section 2.b of *Fair Trials for Fair Wizards* the Gallows Law states that any unmarried pureblood with no heirs may be pardoned from execution if a witch may step forward to take them as their groom."

Another murmur ran through the crowd but she did not flinch, did not sway from Kingsley's gaze even as other members of the court began to speak.

"I'll say it again just to be sure everyone heard me," Hermione interrupted. "I, Hermione Jean Granger, invoke the Gallows Law and will wed this wizard, Draco Lucius Malfoy. Therefore, he must be pardoned."

Kingsley shifted uncomfortably, scanning the room around her, the furrow between his brows deep enough to store a galleon. "We are aware of the law, Miss Granger."

Her brows ticked up in mock innocence. "Oh, good. So, then you should release my future lord husband at once so we can be bonded."

With a step to the side, she gestured towards the cage, but she still could not look at Malfoy. She knew it was cowardice — if she had her way in a few minutes they would be face to face and bound in magic, but for now she would hold on to her fear. It was Harry's eye she caught however. Harry who stood in the aisle as if he had made to grab her, then frozen at her pronouncement.

He did not look angry, as she had assumed. The light brown skin of his cheeks was pallid, a stark contrast to the lightning scar barely visible through his messy fringe. And as their eyes met, he strode forward. Hermione tensed, wondering if Harry would pull her bodily from the room, but he only stood beside her, a hand over the wand in his holster, scanning the room as Kingsley had.

Order was called no less than seven times before silence fell, finally from a well-placed charm wielded by Percy Weasley. Most members of the Wizengamot stared upon Hermione in horror, as if she had performed the cruciatus curse on the Minister rather than invoked an ancient law to pardon an innocent man.

"We will need to discuss—" Kingsley started.

"No need, Minister. I'm sure Mr. Weasley can agree that once this law is invoked, it pardons all prosecutions, trials, and accusations." She smiled sweetly up at Percy who was flicking his wand through a summoned stack of parchments, his finger sliding down the pages until his eyes widened.

“Miss Granger is correct, Minister,” Percy said, a slight wobble in his tone.

Kingsley sighed heavily, his head dropping a fraction. Of course, he already knew and part of Hermione felt sorry for him. A discussion would have allowed his Wizengamot to air their grievances but it would have also given them time to find a potential to work around. Something Malfoy could not afford.

Finally, the Minister for Magic nodded, rapping his knuckles twice upon his desk before flicking his wand. Chains rattled, another sharp intake of breath sliced through her ears, but still, she did not turn.

“By invocation of the Gallows Law, Draco Lucius Malfoy has been pardoned of all charges and will be handed over to the care and protection of his lady wife, Hermione Jean Granger.” A riptide of murmurs swam through the room and Kingsley raised his voice. “Miss Granger, a bonder will be summoned and the ceremony will be performed before Mr. M—”

“Lord Malfoy,” Hermione corrected, brows raised in challenge. If Malfoy was to be pardoned as the law stated, his titles, assets, and estate would be returned to him.

“Lord Malfoy,” Kingsley acquiesced, “is released into your care.”

A hand wrapped around her elbow. “Come on, Mione, before the rest of the crowd is released.”

She allowed Harry to tug her from the room quickly, but as her foot left the dais, she turned to find gray eyes boring into hers. Malfoy’s face was slack, but not with the apathy she had seen before. That was shock written across his pallid features, his hands — unchained — loose and trembling at his sides, chest heaving with rapid breaths.

And she wondered if she had made a grave mistake.

The room Harry ushered her into was quiet, save for the ticking of a clock and the patronus he cast to inform Kingsley where they were. It was a plain Ministry meeting room with a few tables and chairs complete with an enchanted window of the spring rain falling outside. With the *click* of the door Hermione’s hands began to shake. After the whispered *colloportus* her pulse roared so loudly in her ears she wondered if a heart could burst — just explode in someone’s chest.

“Hermione…” Harry murmured, hands curling over her shoulders.

“What have I done?” Hermione whimpered, gripping the front of Harry’s robes. His face swam in and out of her vision, a soft hiccup escaping her lips. “Oh Godric, Harry — *what have I done?”*

Harry shushed her, tucking her head beneath his chin and swaying softly. He was the closest thing she had to family now save Ron and the rest of the Weasleys, since her own had been obliviated and left blissfully unaware of their daughter half a world away.

“Well… it seems that you’re becoming the new Lady Malfoy because you can’t leave well enough alone.” Harry drew back to look her in the eye. “I hope you know I’m your best man, not Ron.”

This time her hiccup was less of a sob as Hermione brushed the tears from her cheeks. “Merlin, *Lady Malfoy*, what was I thinking?”

Harry’s laugh was low and though she knew it was at the unfathomable circumstance she had found herself in, still his laugh was something like a gift. That Harry could lose so much and still find humor, even if it was at her, felt like a miracle.

“For once, I don’t think you were.”

She groaned, thumping her forehead against his chest. “I think you’re right. I just — I couldn’t bear to let them kill him. It wasn’t…”

“It wasn’t right,” Harry agreed softly.

A heavy knock sounded on the door and Hermione stiffened, heart racing madly.

“Oi, open up,” Ron called.

Harry flicked his wand and the door opened with a slam against the opposite wall before Ron blazed into the room, Ginny on his heels.

“Gin, what are you—” Hermione started, wide eyed.

“You really think I would abandon you *on your wedding day?”* The redhead rolled her eyes, reaching into the bag Hermione gifted her a few Christmases ago until only her shoulder remained.

But Hermione could only stare at Ron, whose hands were outstretched to receive the items his sister pulled from her bag: a hair comb, a bottle of mouth freshening potion, a pair of heels Hermione purchased on a whim and never wore.

“Are you…” she began, only for panic to grip her throat.

Ron blinked. “Angry at you?”

She nodded, hands balling into fists. Ron’s temper had softened with time. But she knew from countless run ins with rogue Voldemort supporters in the field and ignorant wizards they’d encountered at the Leaky that it was still there, just a little harder to provoke. This time, however, Ron only grimaced.

“He’s a git, Hermione but…” He blew out a gust of breath and shook his head. “The bloke doesn’t deserve to die for someone else’s crimes.”

“I’m not sure everyone feels the same judging by the full-scale riot that’s broken out in courtroom ten,” Ginny grumbled before snatching the brush from Ron’s hand and moving towards her.

Hermione blanched, her stomach roiling as Ginny forced bodily her into one of the nearby chairs. The pins holding back her curls were plucked before the brush was pulled rhythmically across her scalp, Hermione wincing every so often as it caught on a snarl.

“Uh… Gin? Is there a reason you’re brushing Hermione’s hair like she’s a show pony?” Harry rumbled, crossing to the door to close it before someone stumbled across them.

“What part of *wedding day* do you dolts not understand? She can’t get married looking like this!” Ginny gave a vague sweeping gesture to Hermione’s mussed hair and blotchy cheeks. “No offense.”

But Hermione was too panicked to even respond, not when the reality of what she had done crashed over her. She was going to be married to Draco Malfoy in less than an hour and then what?

“Oh, Merlin where are we going to live? Malfoy can’t move into Grimmauld.”

The room fell silent, the four staring at each other in uncertainty. At the end of the war, it had been logical that the three moved into Sirius’ old townhome. When Ginny finished her NEWTs, she’d wanted to escape Molly’s clutches at the Burrow and took up the last inhabitable bedroom. Since the romance between her and Harry had died a few months after the war ended, the four had fallen into a comfortable comradery.

“I could move in with Oliver…” Ron started with a frown.

“You’ve only been dating a few months,” Hermione breathed.

Ron shrugged, but she saw the hesitation in his eyes. No, there was no way Malfoy could move in with them but according to the law husband and wife must cohabitate. Which meant…

“Fuck.” She dropped her head into her hands, ignoring Ginny’s huff of frustration as she worked the curl smoothing potion through her hair. “We’ll have to move into the manor.”

Ron cleared his throat, Harry shifted uncomfortably, and Ginny wrenched Hermione back up into a sitting position.

“Well, at least you’ll finally get to see the largest library in wizarding Britain,” Ginny quipped, working the last of the potion through Hermione’s curls until they waved down her back and flicking her wand towards Hermione’s startled face.

The cooling charm did nothing to staunch the cresting panic, nor did the skin smoothing charm Ginny cast next to rid Hermione of the worst of the blotches. It was Ron, finally, who squatted in front of her, taking her hand in both of his and squeezing lightly.

“You’ve done a bloody brave thing, Mione — a *good* thing — and you aren’t going into this alone. We’ll be with you every step of the way and if Malfoy isn’t grateful for what you’ve done well then…” He deliberated, shooting a look over his shoulder at Harry who nodded. “Well then he’s a fool.”

Another knock sounded on the door, followed by the low rumbling voice of Kingsley.

“Hermione, Harry, open up.”

She shot to her feet, shooing Ginny away as she tried to encourage her into the heels pulled from the bag. Kingsley was first through the door, face as pale as the night they’d moved Harry to the Burrow before they’d gone on the run. Behind him, Malfoy stepped carefully through the door, gray eyes fixed on hers.

He was taller than she’d realized — taller than Ron even — and for all his sharp angles and willowy frame from an endless starvation, there was still an air of intimidation around him. But the hollows beneath his eyes, the tremble in his left hand, and the wince as the door shut behind him softened any fear of him she might have felt.

“The bonder will be here in a few minutes,” Kingsley explained. “I think it best if we allowed these two a moment alone to… talk.”

Harry turned to Hermione. “Are you all right with that?”

“Of course,” she answered immediately, a surety in her voice she was not positive she truly felt.

The group nodded, filing out the room one by one until Kingsley remained at the threshold. “We will be right outside.”

As the door shut again, she was sure it would be to silence, to her monologuing for another few minutes of all the reasons she’d acted the way she did. But as she opened her mouth to speak, Malfoy’s rasping voice filled the silent room.

“What the *fuck* is wrong with you, Granger?”

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What's wrong with me?" Hermione echoed, heat creeping up the back of her neck. "Nothing is wrong with me. I… I stopped your murder."

But that appeared to be the wrong thing to say from the way Malfoy's face paled, mouth working with a grimace before a humorless laugh slipped through his lips.

"A savior complex must be catching after all those years trailing after *the chosen one*." He ran a hand through his loose hair, the ribbon forgotten somewhere within the courtroom.

"It's good to see you're still as arrogant as you ever were." Hermione's hands tightened into fists, but she winced as the words hit him.

Draco crossed the room until he was only an arm's length away. He leant down until they were eye to eye, his voice, still a rasp of unused muscles, dropped low. "What makes you think I want to marry you, Granger? That I would even agree to this?"

Her stomach twisted, the heat coiling into nausea lodged within her throat.

"There is no agreeing to it, Malfoy. I invoked the law. You'll be pardoned and we will be…" She trailed off, her gaze slipping from his.

"Wed." He spat the word at her like a curse.

Wed to a mudblood, she knew he wanted to say. That he would be sullying his family line by marrying a muggleborn. Did those old prejudices still stand after all those years imprisoned in Azkaban with nothing but his conscience?

"Listen to me, Granger. Revoke the offer. I've made my peace."

Just let me die. It's what they want.

But whatever answer Hermione might have given was drowned by the door opening and the bonder striding into the room, followed by Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Kingsley. Behind them, however, three more entered. Pansy Parkinson was the first, her swinging black bob shining in the sconces on the wall, attention flicking from Hermione's curls down to her worn heels. Blaise Zabini had his hands in his pockets, attention fixed on Draco, full mouth set into a firm line. Theodore Nott closed the door behind him, assessing each in the room but lingering on Harry.

Beside her, Draco stiffened at the sight of his friends. He flinched as Pansy wrapped her arms around him and Hermione wondered if that was the first time he'd been touched in years except to be chained. She could not hear whatever it was Pansy whispered to him, only the murmur of her low tone and Draco nodding, gray eyes sliding to Hermione and away again.

“Lord Malfoy,” the bonder, a wizard the size of Professor Flitwick, called from the center of the room. “Miss Granger, if you please.”

Sweat slicked Hermione’s palms and she wiped them on her skirt as Draco extricated himself from Pansy, shying away from the hand Blaise placed on his shoulder before moving to the spot indicated by the bonder. Hermione made to follow, but fingers wrapped around her wrist, sharp nails grazing her skin.

“Granger,” Pansy hissed. She turned, wide eyed, wondering what insults would be thrown at her, only to see the witch’s green eyes glassy. *“Thank you.”*

Hermione nodded before she slipped her hand from Pansy’s and took her place beside Malfoy.

“I admit the Gallows Law has not been invoked in some two hundred years,” the bonder chuckled, flipping through the tome he pulled from the inside pocket of his robe and restoring to full size. “Ah, yes, here we go.”

“Is the bonding different?” Kingsley asked quietly from over the bonder’s shoulder.

The bonder shook his head, conjuring a stand to rest his tome upon and gazing up at the pair. “No, the ceremony itself is no different than any other marriage, however their magic may… resist the bond as they have not come together through love and understanding.”

Resist the bond. Another reminder that Hermione was tying herself to Malfoy for the rest of her life. Not just herself, but her magic. This was a bond that could be severed only through death. She had known that before this moment, but now the knowledge weighed upon her like a stone.

“If you would, Lord Malfoy, take your intended’s hand.”

The muscle in Malfoy’s jaw ticked again and she wondered if he would object. But he only took a deep breath before extending his trembling hands. No… not trembling, they were *tremoring*, Hermione realized as she looked down at them. His body had obviously suffered from all those years locked in a cell, perpetually damp and repressed from his magic. And then she spied the copper band around his wrists and blanched.

“What is that?” she said, not taking his hand but gesturing towards his wrists.

“Magical suppressants,” Kingsley answered with a frown. “For the trial.”

“Remove them,” she commanded. “He is pardoned and to be freed. You will remove them, immediately.”

Even the clock seemed to quiet. But after a moment, Kingsley nodded, reaching forward to tap his wand to each copper cuff, vanishing them in a burst of white smoke.

Malfoy shivered, his eyes fluttering and blonde brows drawing together. Was it pain or relief that caused his face to tighten? Hermione thought she could feel his magic running through him, close as she was, like the rushing of the tide over the shore.

“Let’s continue. Lord Malfoy, if you please,” the bonder encouraged.

But Malfoy stood frozen, lids still squeezed shut against the onslaught.

“Take your time,” Hermione murmured.

His eyes flashed open, none of the life returning to his eyes but the gray more of a violet, like his mother’s had been. If she had hoped to find gratitude there, she was sadly mistaken. But still, he raised his hand, palm up, and slowly Hermione placed one in his.

Ice cold, as if he’d stuck them into a freezing river. The tremor was still there and she tried to ignore his flinch as their skin touched. His fingers flexed as though he would pull away before they relaxed, a soft sigh of defeat ghosting across her face.

The marriage rites were simple, a shorter version than the ones she had seen at Bill and Fleur’s wedding, then Neville and Hannah’s as well as George and Angelina’s. With a wave of his wand, the bonder cast a golden light around the pair.

I, Hermione Jean Granger…

I, Draco Lucius Malfoy…

…take you to be my lord husband…

…take you to be my lady wife…

Hermione knew what would happen next, how they would seal the bond, and yet still her breath caught as the bonder raised his wand high, looking imperiously between the two.

“Now, Lord Malfoy, claim your bride and seal the bond with an everlasting kiss.”

Again, that muscle ticked, but he slowly lifted his free hand to lightly touch the edge of her jaw. The caress of his fingertips against her sensitive skin was… strange. Her magic fluttered inside her chest in answer and she wondered if it was the bond attempting to take shape. It could have been a second or a century that Malfoy hesitated before he leant down and brushed his lips across hers.

A spark, a shiver, a sigh. She thought he might have lingered for a breath, but her lids fluttered closed of her own accord and her hand found its way to his chest. The rigid bone of his sternum was sharp beneath the silken fabric of his shirt, the heavy thrumming of his heart like the beating of a drum. And then he jerked back, his hand falling from her face, that blank look sliding back across his face — the same one she had seen that morning within his cell as he stared at the sea.

“I now pronounce you bonded for life.”

There was no rush of congratulations, no applause as there had been with the other weddings she’d attended. Only the glowing gold bond fading into nothing and Kingsley stepping forward, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“The ministry requires the marriage to be consummated within thirty days. There is a piece of magic within the bond cast that will notify the ministry when it is done.”

Malfoy, if possible, grew even paler while Hermione choked. “Thirty days? What happens if we don’t comply?”

Kingsley grimaced. “The invocation will be revoked and Lord Malfoy will be put to death.”

Thirty days…

Kingsley’s words were added to the cacophony inside her head as they made their way silently from the Ministry. Her friends gathered, but she could not truly hear what they said, only the hum of their voices and the distant feeling of their arms around her. Malfoy’s friends were the same, though he’d been quick to step out of their embrace in favor fixing his attention on the private floo Kingsley guided them to, nestled into a hidden panel in the wall.

Hermione stepped in first, turning to wait for Malfoy who stared at her for a long moment. She could not read him as he finally stepped over the threshold but she thought he might have stiffened as she threw the powder at their feet, calling out their destination.

“Malfoy Manor.”

They spun for only a few moments before the manor whirled into view. Sparkling black marble, high windows draped in velvet curtains. Hermione stumbled out first, casting a cleaning charm on her robes, unable to suppress the shiver down her spine. Were those hands on her arms? Binds on her wrists? Was that the scent of blood?

But the hall was silent. That was not a cackle she heard echoing across the floor. Not her scream of terror as the blade dug into her skin. Hermione took a deep breath, pressing her fingers to her eyelids.

“Not real, not real, not real,” she whispered, low enough she prayed Malfoy would not hear.

Finally, she allowed her hand to drop, rolling back her shoulders and ready to face his wrath, only to find Malfoy frozen inside the grate. He could have been hewn from stone, just as he had that morning within his cell.

What must it be like for him to have thought this day would have ended with his death, only to find himself back in his childhood home?

“Malfoy…” her voice was gentle as she took a step towards him.

His shoulders stiffened, eyes squeezing shut, and a spark of magic danced around his fists. Hermione reached out, but drew her hand back at the last moment when he jerked away, shoulders hitting the brick behind him.

“It’s okay, you’re safe… you’re home.”

Chapter End Notes

Helloooo! I have no chill so you're getting these chapters on Thursday evening instead of Friday this week. As a reminder — this fic is fully written & I will be uploading every Friday (or Thursday evening lol) with the completion of the fic happening on October 4th. I am so incredibly grateful for the reception y'all have given this fic, it has seriously made my week.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took Malfoy three quarters of an hour to exit the floo.

Another twenty to make it to the base of the staircase.

Another ten to climb the grand steps to where Hermione assumed the family quarters lay.

Perhaps him dying would have been a mercy to this. To watching him navigate the world with his fists clenched, each echoing step making him wince, to the thudding of his pulse visible through the thin skin of his throat, right beside the prisoner tattoo.

Would he ever leave the manor again? Somehow, she could not imagine him ambling down Diagon Alley smirking at passing witches the way he had as a boy. As the heavy oak door of his bedchamber, carved with snakes and magnolias, shut, leaving her standing out in the hall wringing her hands, she thought it might be a miracle if he ever left his room again.

A soft *pop* echoed through the hall and she jumped, stumbling back from the tiny house elf appearing at her side.

“Apologies, mistress,” the elf said soothingly.

Discomfort crawled across her skin. “I… I’m not your mistress.”

The elf blinked wide eyes up at her, but the look was pitying. “You are Master Draco’s wife, yes?”

Hermione nodded, the discomfort pooling in her stomach until she wondered if she might be sick.

“Then you are Lottie’s mistress,” the elf finished with a shrug.

Working for the DMLE for the last five years and being entrenched within the ministry had taught Hermione many things — one being the relationship between house elves and their masters. She knew that Lottie must be tied to the Malfoy estate and also understood better than her thirteen-year-old counterpart that elves enjoyed their work. But the idea of owning a house elf still chafed against her heart, already rubbed so raw by the last few hours she was sure she was bleeding from the inside out.

“I…” Hermione swallowed. “I promise to treat you well.”

It was all she could say, and when Lottie merely blinked as if to say *well of course you will* Hermione gestured towards Malfoy’s door.

“Will you make sure he’s all right?”

Lottie hummed, sliding a hand down the front of her tea towel and rolling her shoulders back importantly. “Lottie will ensure master is cared for. The moment Lottie heard you arrive she had new linens placed on all the beds and tea is ready whenever Master and Mistress are.”

The little elf gazed questioningly up at her and Hermione shook herself. “Ah, right. Well… I’m okay right now, Lottie, thank you. But perhaps Mal—Mast—Dra—perhaps he might want some.”

Lottie nodded. “Just call for Lottie when you are ready.”

Hermione’s heartbeat spiked in her ears and she reached out to stop the elf from disapparating. “Wait! You… I think you should check with him, not me. I—I should find my own bedchamber and return to my home to gather my things.”

A heavy silence stretched between them, the elf’s ears drooping ever so slightly. “Mistress will not stay in Master Draco’s chambers?”

Did she have to stay in Malfoy’s chambers? Surely not. Surely cohabitating within the same house (well, manor) was enough. So, Hermione shook her head, working to keep the grimace off her face before lowering her voice to a whisper and flicking a silencing charm towards the door.

“You know where he has been for the last five years?”

The little elf nodded solemnly. “Master Draco has been in Azkaban.”

“I do not believe he would like me to stay in his rooms with him, Lottie, and it’s important that we give him as much space as he needs. Is there another bedroom I might stay in? Perhaps a guest room?”

Lottie pursed her lips before gesturing with a wave and guiding her down the hall. They stopped before another dark oak door, one inlaid with laurel leaves and pomegranates.

“Mistress can stay here.”

With a snap of her fingers, the door swung open to reveal a lavish room of blues and creams, complete with two French doors and a small balcony overlooking the grounds. It was lush, but understated in its luxury.

“Thank you, Lottie, it’s wonderful.”

The house elf hummed, drawing back the thick blue curtains framing the windows before touching the door on the far wall beside the white mantled fireplace. “Master Draco’s bedroom is through this door.”

Hermione froze in the act of dragging her fingertips across the dark blue bedspread embroidered with feathers and stars. Before she could argue, Lottie assured her she would have the other elves ready for her arrival with her things and disappeared with a *pop*.

“Bugger,” she cursed, before flopping down on to the bed that was too comfortable for its own good.

“You have a match tomorrow, Gin, you should be resting.”

Ginny rolled her eyes as she flicked her wand towards the trunk at the end of Hermione’s bed, neatening the haphazard folding charm she’d attempted. “I could play the Wimborne Wasps in my sleep with a full body bind.”

Harry chuckled from the other side, carefully placing Hermione’s framed photographs into a box surrounded by a cushioning charm.

When she arrived back at Grimmauld, she expected the three of them to be waiting for her. What she hadn’t expected was for Harry to have made an early dinner, Ron opening a bottle of wine, and Ginny already organizing her belongings into *leave, take,* and *burn* piles. They’d enjoyed a companionable dinner, allowing Hermione to relive the last few hours, describing the empty look in Malfoy’s face and the zombie-like way he’d traveled through the manor.

Now settled in her room, her throat burned at the thought of leaving them behind.

“We’ll be only a floo call away,” Ron murmured, throwing a heavy arm around her shoulder.

The sigh she loosed threatened to pull her through the floorboards, but she nodded. There was no sense in wallowing she knew, and yet the burn in her throat crept towards her eyes.

“Who knows…” Ginny started, holding up one of Hermione’s blouses for inspection before throwing it into the *burn* pile. “Maybe this will all work out, you know? Maybe you and Malfoy will fall madly in love and have tons of babies and have a happily ever after.”

A long stretch of silence greeted these words, followed by a riot of laughter. Hermione was unsure when the line of laughter and panic was crossed. When was it that she found herself gasping for air and clutching her chest, pressed tightly to Ron, Harry stroking her curls while Ginny held her hand. But she did not allow herself to cry, only clutched at her friends as if the moment she left the townhouse she would never see them again.

But it was true, wasn’t it? Those were the things she had given up in order to protect Malfoy — a boy that had been cruel to her all throughout her childhood. A wizard who had spent the last five years in Azkaban and now trembled at the sight of his ancestral home. Her life would now be skirting through an empty manor, finding reasons to leave, watching her friends grow and find partners and have families.

And Hermione would be… well… alone.

Finally, she quieted and they packed the rest of her things in silence, waving away their offer to help her move her things. Nothing was so cumbersome that a shrinking charm would not fix, save for the books she would come back for in trips, if only for an excuse to leave the manor. Earlier that afternoon she’d received an owl from Kingsley that she was to take the rest of the week off work to *adjust to her new circumstances*.

By the time she found herself back in her new bedroom it was well past eleven. A fire had been lit in the hearth chasing away the chill spring night, but she had still opened the doors to the balcony once she'd restored her boxes to full size and settled them around the seating area before the mantle. Below her, the rose gardens looked wild, untouched perhaps for years, the blooms small and strangled through weaving ivy and grass.

"Would mistress like Lottie to unpack for her?"

Hermione jumped, a soft squeal slipping through her lips as she whirled to find the elf already going through the boxes. "*Lottie*, you scared me."

"Apologies, mistress," the elf said, sincerity clear in her tone and Hermione realized the little elf had already unpacked the trunk, her clothes floating towards the wardrobe tucked against the far wall.

She watched her for a little while, wondering if she should step in and demand to unpack her own things. But Lottie appeared so pleased with her task she was afraid to upset her, so instead Hermione turned back to the garden, lit by the light of the full moon.

"Lottie… why does the rose garden look so over grown? The rest of the estate appears well maintained."

"Mistress Cissa told the elves she was the only one to care for the roses." The words were said slowly and Hermione turned to see the elf had stopped in her task, smoothing her hands over the bedcovers she turned down. "When Mistress Cissa died… we…"

They did not want to go against the wishes of a dead woman. Hermione nodded, heat pricking in the corners of her eyes.

"You did the right thing, Lottie."

At those words, the elf let out a sigh of relief, smiling brightly at Hermione and finishing what would have taken her much longer. "Is there anything else you are needing?"

Hermione grimaced, gesturing towards the door that connected her and Malfoy's room. "How… How was he?"

It was as if all the air was sucked from the room. The elf gave a small shake of her head, her ears flapping around her face before she twisted the tea towel in her hands.

"Master Draco is… unwell."

That might have been the understatement of the century, but Hermione nodded. "Did he eat?"

"Master Draco was unable to eat his favorites Hutch prepared for him, got sick he did."

Of course he did, after years of surviving on prison food Hermione should have realized he would be unable to stomach most things. Something twisted in her heart, pulling against her ribs towards the door at the far end of the room.

Hutch must have been the elf that ran the kitchens. “Could Hutch possibly prepare a bit of broth for Malfoy? Maybe some toast?”

The little elf nodded enthusiastically. “Is Mistress needing dinner as well?”

Biting back another grimace, she shook her head. “Thank you, but I ate at ho—at my friend’s home.”

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief when Lottie did not appear offended by this news and popped off to deliver the order to the kitchens. She quickly changed into more comfortable clothes, sliding off her pencil skirt and blouse in favor of a worn pair of leggings and a Puddlemere United sweatshirt she’d stolen from Harry a few years back.

When she was finally slipping between the sheets, ready to curl up with the werewolf romance novel she would never admit to a single soul she was devouring, a pop echoed through the room.

“Here you go, mistress.” Lottie’s voice was firm as she put down the tray laden with a steaming bowl of broth and a few slices of toast down on the coffee table, complete with a sparkling goblet of water.

“I didn’t need dinner, Lottie, but thank you.”

The elf gazed up at her innocently. “This is for Master Draco.”

And then with another *pop* she was gone.

Hermione fell back against the pillows with a groan. She should have accounted for meddling house elves. Flicking her wand to set a stasis charm over the tray, she stared up at the gauzy white canopy of the bed. She could try to summon another elf… or else command Lottie to bring it to him. But the idea made her stomach twist and a sweat broke out on the back of her neck. No, she would not stoop so low and for some reason she thought the little elf knew it too.

“Fucking hell,” she muttered, finally rolling from the bed and grabbing up the tray.

Balancing it one hand, she knocked on the connecting door, unsurprised when no one answered.

“Malfoy? It’s… It’s Hermione. I have some food for you.”

No answer.

“I’m going to come in if that’s okay.”

No response.

With a sigh, she turned the knob surprised to find it give beneath. Draco’s room was exactly as she imagined it would be: a swath of silver, black, and emerald. The large four poster bed,

similar to Hermione's, was empty and appeared untouched. But there was a large bookcase beside it overflowing with tomes she itched to inspect.

Another time.

Instead, she quietly padded through the room before finally spying a door cracked open on the opposite end. Dread sleuthed through her veins, but she took a deep breath and slowly pulled open the door.

There, still fully clothed in the robes the Ministry had dressed him in, lay Malfoy. She would have thought him asleep if his eyes had not been open, staring at the clothes hanging across. His knees were pulled tightly to his chests, knuckles bleached white where they wrapped around his elbows.

"Hello…" Hermione breathed, soft as a whisper.

But still he flinched, eyes squeezing shut. Carefully, she set the tray down on the floor and arranged herself into a sitting position at the threshold of the closet.

"Leave." The word was sandpaper over a chalkboard, as if he had been screaming for hours.

Steeling herself the way she did when Teddy threw a tantrum, she took a deep breath. "You need to eat."

She thought she might have heard a hollow chuckle, but it was gone in the next moment.

"You are not my wife, nor my caretaker."

The words rang through her mind, salt in the wound already open. She would be alone; she would be trapped here with him. This was her life now, thrown away for a single moment of compassion.

"No…I'm both, it seems," she countered after a moment, shifting to her knees and sliding the tray between them.

Malfoy did not reply, only clutched his elbows tighter until nails dug into the fabric of his robes. His entire body trembled and she clenched her own fists to resist the urge to touch him.

"Why are you in the closet?"

Silence stretched between them, the steam wafting from the broth filling the closet with the comforting scent of herbs and chicken, reminding Hermione of when she had been sick as a child and her mother had cared for her.

"Too open," Malfoy answered, so low she wasn't sure if she truly heard him.

Too open. She remembered the tiny cell in Azkaban with its low ceiling and sliver of window. The bedroom beyond the closet was vaulted, with multiple windows overlooking the same garden as her own. Hermione could not begin to imagine what it felt like, and the image of Draco there, huddled within his closet, misted before she blinked and nodded.

Without saying another word, she slid the tray closer to him, before rising to her feet, leaving the closet and closing the door behind her until only a crack remained. And she found herself proud that she was safely ensconced back in her own room before the first sob ripped from her throat.

Chapter End Notes

Buckle up y'all. See you next week. xo.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Slytherins arrived the next day.

It had been the result of a desperate late-night owl once Hermione had pulled herself together and sat in the bath until her skin pruned and the water cooled.

Theodore Nott was the first to step through the floo, clutching a shiny white box wrapped with string. The smile he gave her was blinding, all white teeth and dimples as he waved his wand over his soot covered robes.

“Hermione,” he breathed, placing the box down on a small side table and enveloping her in his arms.

She froze within the sudden show of affection and awkwardly patted his back. “Hello, Theodore. Thank you for coming.”

His chuckle was soft and he squeezed her tighter before letting go. “Call me Theo. And it’s me who should be thanking you. Speaking of which,” he picked up the box and shook it gently, “I’ve come bearing gifts of butter, pastry, and chocolate.”

A knot loosened in Hermione’s chest at his easy smile. Lottie appeared with a *pop*, hugging Theo around the knees, commanding them towards the sunroom, and then disapparating with the box in her hands.

“Bossy little thing, isn’t she?” He commented dryly, moving out of the way as the fire flared green again.

Pansy flicked her wand before she even exited out of the grate, the scant traces of ash and soot disappearing from her immaculately tailored black trousers and silk blouse. Hermione expected the witch to sneer at the sight of her, but those sharp green eyes only assessed the muggle denims and sweatshirt ensemble quickly before she too swept Hermione into a hug.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.” Pansy repeated the words over and over until Hermione was smoothing a hand down the woman’s back, rocking her lightly.

That was how Blaise Zabini found them as he stepped through the floo and Hermione could not help but think how similar the image must have been to the embrace she had found herself in yesterday with her three friends. Especially when Blaise came forward to run his hand over Pansy’s hair.

“Hey,” he murmured. “I thought we agreed no waterworks on the Gryffindor.”

Pansy hiccupped, drawing back with a laugh that could have been a sob, wiping her cheek on the back of her hand. “Oh, Salazar, we did agree to that didn’t we?”

Blaise kept a hand on the back of Pansy's neck, but he leant forward to wrap Hermione in a one-armed hug, and kissing each of her cheeks. "Hello, gorgeous. Thank you for inviting us."

"I had no idea you lot would be so affectionate," Hermione blurted.

Thick eyebrows raised in surprise before the three laughed, bass, baritone and alto mixing into harmony. They did not appear offended by her statement, especially when Pansy linked arms with Hermione and tugged her down the hall, the wizards following behind.

"When you grow up as the four of us did… you find affection where you can," Pansy explained. "You either grow desperate for it or—"

"Or fearful of it," Theo cut across her, giving Hermione a meaningful look when she glanced back at him.

Pansy led them through a small door Hermione hadn't seen before. Granted she hadn't done much exploring given the panic that tended to slink through her veins if she wandered from the traveling parlor — the cackle she was sure was ringing through the halls only to vanish in the next breath. This room was smaller than many of the others, painted a bright sunshine yellow and the far part, towards the gardens, was more window than wall. Most surfaces were covered in winding ivy and lush leafy plants, putting Hermione in mind of a jungle.

"I always loved this room," Pansy murmured with a sigh, letting go of Hermione's arm and falling into one of the cream damask armchairs settled around a small white table.

The rest followed suit, a tray of tea and the pastries Theo brought appearing on the table in front of them. And though the rest fixed their tea and loaded a pastry on to their plate, Hermione could only frown.

"What is it?" Theo asked.

"Aren't you… Aren't you here to see Malfoy?"

Slowly, Blaise set down his tea cup while Pansy leant forward to take her hand.

She squeezed it lightly. "We are here to see both of you. Now, tell us more about what's going on."

In fits and bursts, Hermione explained all that happened since they left the Ministry. Her letter to them hadn't said much, only that she felt Malfoy needed them and if it was not too inconvenient, would they be willing to drop by for a visit? In no way had she imagined that the three would reply back within the hour with news that they would arrive via floo bright and early the next morning.

When she finished explaining about the closet, the three wore the same hollow-eyed gaze she saw that morning in her own mirror — similar to the one she saw on Malfoy. Theo blew out a long breath, looking between his two friends. It was quite like how she sometimes looked at Harry and Ron. Decades of friendship had created a silent form of communication between them and it was fascinating to see it play out before her.

“That’s a lot to put on your shoulders,” Theo finally said, folding back up his napkin and scooting his chair out to face her fully.

Hermione shrugged, playing with the delicate edge of the teacup before her, contents now cold. Pansy also turned, face pinched.

“We wrote to him for years, Hermione, *years*, and never once did he write back.” Pansy sighed, shaking her head. “And it made me so mad for longer than I want to admit. Over and over, I wondered why it was he had given up when we hadn’t. It took me until last Christmas to finally figure it out.”

When Hermione did not answer, her lips only turning down into a frown, Pansy shot a look at Theo.

A warm hand wrapped around hers, tugging it until she turned towards him. Theo leveled his gaze with hers. “Can you think of a reason why he didn’t write us? Why he didn’t speak to you when you came to his cell? Why even now he’ll barely say more than a few words to you?”

“Because he knew he was going to die…” she breathed.

The three nodded. The solemn expression on Theo’s face was a strange contrast to the bubbling joy she’d seen when he’d arrived. “When you think for so long that you are lost to this world only to find yourself alive and free… That does things to a person, Hermione. Things you cannot imagine.”

He turned his head and finally Hermione caught sight of the tattoo running down the side of his neck, covered by his curls. She’d forgotten that Theo served time in Azkaban, only a few cells down from Draco. He’d spent the better part of a year within the prison and countless articles were written in the Prophet during that time wondering if he would be the scapegoat for his father’s crimes.

“Did I make a mistake?” The words were barely more than a sob, tears stinging her tired eyes. “Would it have been kinder to let him die?”

Shame coiled around her throat — that she would cry before someone who had suffered more than she could imagine. She had been tortured, yes, but Theo? Malfoy? That was a torture she could not fathom.

Someone wrapped their hands around her shoulders, squeezing tight. “Hermione, look at me.”

She blinked through her tears, Blaise’s face swimming in her vision, his cheeks shining in the morning light from the grief spilling down his face.

“Sometimes the kindest option is not the best.” Blaise crushed her to his wide chest, shushing her with his own hiccupping sobs.

Hermione wasn't sure how long they stood like that. But she did know that her tears had dried long before Blaise's, and, from the desperate way he clung to her, that he had needed the embrace much more. And so, it was her turn to comfort, head spinning from the heavy weight of grief that settled in the last twenty-four hours.

Yesterday had been just another day, another case she hoped to win. She'd barely thought of today other than the meetings on her calendar, the dinner she might make for Harry and Gin since Ron had planned a date with Oliver.

And now here she was, surrounded by Slytherins in the ornate sun room of Malfoy Manor.

"I won't keep you from him any longer," Hermione finally said, stepping away from Blaise and wrapping her arms around her middle.

Theo frowned, but it was Pansy that stepped forward, brushing back the curls around Hermione's face with perfectly manicured nails.

"Draco is family," she gave her a small smile, "and now you're our family too."

They left Hermione after that, with promises of coming down for lunch and what sounded like a mild threat from Pansy about a shopping trip.

She spent the rest of the morning staring at Narcissa's roses. First from inside the sun room before eventually wandering her way out into the grounds. They were gnarled, more thorns than blossoms, with leaves edged in black and brown.

That was where Harry found her, nose so close to one of the blooms she was in danger of falling in, a summoned quill and parchment in either hand. For the last hour she'd catalogued the decay of the blooms, the size and color of the leaves in hopes of finding the best solution for the roses. There was just something about leaving them in this state… It felt much like when she had watched Malfoy from her seat within the court.

She just could not leave well enough alone.

"Have you already resorted to communing with nature?" Harry asked, arms crossed over his chest and a brow raised behind his glasses.

Hermione didn't look up, only moved on to another blossom tipped with black rot. "Do you think Neville would know anything about roses?"

"Is the sky blue?" Harry laughed. "Come on, let's get inside before you… I don't know… turn in to Professor Sprout."

Slinging an arm around her shoulders, Harry tugged her towards the open sunroom doors, skittering to a stop as Theo, Pansy, and Blaise filed in from the hall.

"Erm… Hello." Harry's cheeks darkened and he ran a hand through his hair as if that would cover the awkward moment.

The look of horror that stained their faces melted at the sight of Harry, Theo's grin spreading so wide it took up half his face.

"Potter, you're looking lovely as ever."

The heat from Harry's cheeks radiated outward until Hermione stepped away for fear of being burned. Behind Theo, Blaise waggled his eyebrows while Pansy frowned again at Hermione's muggle denims.

"Would you like to stay for lunch, Potter?" Blaise offered finally, gesturing towards the table now beautifully laid with sandwiches.

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek, watching the play of emotion across Harry's face. The discomfort he felt around people he did not know warring with the delicious spread and whatever that blush had been about.

"Stay, Harry, if you have the time," Hermione murmured, tugging on the sleeve of his robes.

With a sigh, Harry nodded, allowing Hermione to tow him towards the table. As luck would have it, he found himself nestled between Pansy and Theo across from Hermione. The corner of Theo's lip curled into a grin, pouring Harry a glass of pumpkin juice, while Harry looked over at Hermione, widening his eyes in the universal symbol of: *help me*.

"Tell me Potter, truly, are all aurors this fit or is this just your fantastic genetics?" Theo asked mildly.

Pansy rolled her eyes, biting delicately into one of her tea sandwiches before turning to Hermione and Blaise. "Should we call for Lottie and have her bring a mop? Theo's getting his drool all over the floor."

Chapter End Notes

See you next Friday. x

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

That evening, Hermione once again found herself standing before the connecting door, carrying a tray of food. This time it was bone broth with a nutrition potion mixed in, with hearty rye bread and some blanched veg. The little elf had informed her in the early afternoon that Malfoy had managed to eat the entirety of the food Hermione left him last night, though he'd eaten nothing for breakfast or lunch.

Hermione knocked, wincing at the sound before calling out that it was her and she was coming in. Of course there was no answer, and she wasn't altogether surprised that the room was virtually untouched, save for the pile of books that had been left outside the cracked door of the closet. She tilted her head as she slowly put the tray on the floor and lowered to her knees.

Moonlight, Myth, and Madness: A Werewolf Anthology

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them

Vanity, Veins, and Vengeance: Understanding the Modern Vampire

Pride and Prejudice

She frowned at that last one, wondering who it was that might have left him Jane Austen, before carefully opening the closet door. Malfoy was still where she'd left him last night, knees pulled tight to his chest, clad in the same clothing they'd arrived in yesterday.

"Are you hungry?" She tried her best to make her voice soft, but still he winced, eyes squeezing shut.

Scooting in a little further, she pulled the door closed behind her, allowing just the crack to stay open. A small bit of tension released from Malfoy's shoulders, though his hands stayed clenched around his shins.

"No."

She hummed her understanding, reaching through the crack in the door to slide the pile of books in. They were well loved, these books, spines cracked (to her dismay) and pages worn. As she laid them on the soft rug beneath them, she thought she might have just learned a little more about Malfoy.

"Do you like magical creatures?" When he did not answer, she picked up the closest book and flipped open the cover to the initials written beneath the title: D.L.M. "*Vanity, Veins, and Vengeance: Understanding the Modern Vampire*. Is this your copy?"

Softer than the flutter of a bird's wings, Malfoy sighed. "Yes."

Right. Of course. Hermione shifted, getting a little more comfortable and grateful that Malfoy had chosen a semi-spacious closet. Scooting the tray a little closer to him, she settled the book on her knee and opened to chapter one: *The Beauty of the Immortal Gift.*

"*It is no mistake that vampires are beautiful. That is part of their allure, like a poisonous flower, their resplendence is there to lure their prey…"*

Something of a ritual began between for the rest of the week. The Slytherins would arrive in the morning to spend a few hours with Malfoy. She knew from their conversation at lunch that they were trying to encourage him to step outside, to bathe, even just to change his clothes, but he did little more than stare at the wall, barely acknowledging them. They debated how he was taking care of his bodily functions, whether by magic or other means, but all agreed that they felt helpless in the face of his apathy.

She spent the majority of her day in the garden, or else reading the books Neville owled her. It had taken her two days to build up the courage to start pruning the ivy and weeds. But she found she liked gardening and enjoyed the satisfaction of seeing the impact she could make upon the word in a tangible way. Something positive… something meaningful — something she hopefully would not regret.

Each night Hermione would carry a tray into Malfoy's room, slide it into his closet, and pick up from wherever she left off in the book. By Sunday, they'd finished *Vanity, Veins, and Vengeance* and were just starting on *Moonlight, Myth, and Madness.* Malfoy did not speak to her, whether to stop her from reading or to encourage, nor did he move. Only stared at the wall of clothing before him, but on occasion she'd watched him drift to sleep, his mouth growing slack and brows smoothing.

"I go back to work tomorrow," she said, marking her place with a summoned bookmark.

Malfoy tensed, his slow breathing quickening. Hermione bit the inside of her cheek, fiddling with the edge of the cover.

"I'll leave around six-thirty and should be home around eight." Strange that she thought of the manor as home after barely a week.

"That's a long day." The words were a rasp, but Hermione froze. It was the most he'd said to her in days, since he'd pointed out that she was not truly his wife or caretaker.

Hermione forced herself to chuckle. "I suppose. Ron said that someone has been managing my cases while I've been gone, so I'm hoping I won't be late. Would… would you like me to let you know if I will be?"

Malfoy's throat bobbed with a swallow before he gave the barest of nods. Warmth bubbled through her chest. That nod felt more like an embrace but she bit back her excitement, smoothing her hands over the cover of the worn book and letting her shoulders drop.

"All right then. Perhaps while I'm gone you could think about taking a bath… or changing your clothes."

He did not respond and finally Hermione got to her feet, sliding the tray closer to his side and leaving the closet door cracked behind her.

Monday arrived and with it the nightmare of returning to work. Hermione hadn't realized that all week she hadn't received or seen a single Prophet, as preoccupied as she'd been with Malfoy and the manor. But now, she wished she had as eyes followed her through the atrium, wizards and witches stepping out of her way to whisper behind their hands.

"Blimey, Hermione, you should have told me you were coming in today." Ron's hand curled around her arm, holding her as he caught up.

She frowned. "Of course I'm coming in today, Kings only gave me the week and Harrison wouldn't appreciate me getting behind on my cases."

Ron grumbled something unintelligible, shooting a look over her shoulder that sent a wizard stumbling back. He and Harry had both filled out since their time on the run, Ron's shoulders growing steadily wider as Harry grew taller. It was to his advantage, she knew, out in the field where size and strength mattered just as much as magical ability.

"Tell me what's going on," Hermione hissed as they skirted around a large group gawking at her.

Ron tugged her forward, sliding into an empty lift and shutting the grate before anyone else could enter and hitting the button for level two. "According to the Prophet, popular opinion is pretty split on the matter."

"What matter?"

He rolled his eyes. "Harry's new haircut — honestly, what do you think? On the matter of you marrying Draco bloody Malfoy. Which reminds me, are you changing your name?"

She blanched. "W—what?"

Waving a hand, Ron shook his head. "Never mind, not important. Anyway, for the last week the Prophet's been running a column discussing the marriage. They've gone so far as to speculate between a secret romance, a lovechild conceived at Hogwarts—"

"I'm sorry, *what?*"

"—and the imperius," Ron finished with a grimace. "It hasn't been pretty."

Hermione huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. She wasn't surprised that the marriage — *her* marriage — had been the subject of gossip within the Prophet, nor was she truly surprised to see the gawkers within the atrium. It was the Triwizard Tournament all over again.

"It will pass, Ron," she soothed as the lift came to a stop.

The doors opened with a *ding* and Ron wrenched open the grate, guiding her down the long rows of cubicles and to her office settled in the back. Harry jumped up from her chair, running a hand through his hair.

“Bloody hell, Mione. You should have told us you were coming back to work today.”

Brows pinching, Hermione skirted past them to hang up her jacket and eyed her in-tray. “Yes, Harry, just as I told Ron: Kings only gave me a week off. Of course I’m back today.”

“But… the Prophet—”

“Does what it does best: gossips. But I will not cower in the face of a wannabe Rita Skeeter looking to compare the Golden Girl to a Death Eater Slag.”

“Oh, so you’ve read the headlines,” Harry deadpanned.

She shrugged. “No, but perhaps I’ll cancel my subscription.”

Ron peered through the threshold of her office, watching aurors and other advisors pass. “Gin already did.”

Oh. Well that explained why she hadn’t gotten a newspaper since last Monday.

“Wait… Harry how did you know I was returning to work today?”

A blush darkened his cheeks and he suddenly became very interested in pinning his auror badge on just so. *“Theotoldme.”*

“Sorry, what was that?” She leant closer, cupping her hand around her ear.

He sighed, meeting her gaze. “I received an owl from Theo that you were returning to work today, but I didn’t get it until this morning since I was on an overnight.”

There were dark smudges beneath his eyes, the shadow of a beard crusting on his cheeks.

“Oh, Harry you need to go home and get some rest.”

He nodded. “I think you should go home too, Mione. I… people are getting really heated about you marrying Malfoy and I don’t know if it’s a good idea to be in the public eye right now.”

An incredulous laugh bubbled out of her. “The *public eye?* Harry, I’m at work. The most dangerous thing here might be either a papercut or a verbal lashing from Harrison if I don’t finish my casework on time. Which reminds me: where’s Dean, I need him to catch me up.”

Harry and Ron exchanged a glance and she didn’t need to hear the words to know the debate bouncing between them.

“I am a fully grown adult woman, Harry James Potter. Either give me solid, substantial reasoning as to why I should return to the manor or let me get to work.”

Dean skittered to a stop before her office in the next moment, catching himself on the frame. “Oh, hey, Hermione, you’re back. Great, got a mo’ for me to catch you up?”

Throwing her boys one last exasperated look, she grabbed up the files in her in-tray and followed after Dean towards the conference room at the end of the hall.

The rest of the day passed without note and if anyone lingered at her door or shot her dirty looks as she rushed down to the cafeteria before running back to her desk, she didn’t notice. But she had to admit it was a relief to return home and fall on the couch beside the roaring hearth.

The usual tray appeared with a *pop* on the table before her, this time with two plates and two glasses. Malfoy’s usual broth, this time with bits of meat and veg, and a dish of pasta for her complete with a glass of water for him and wine for her.

“Merlin bless Lottie,” she breathed, slipping off her heels and grabbing up her tray before crossing the room.

There hadn’t been a moment really until now to think about what she would find on the other end of the door, though thoughts of Malfoy had lingered in the back of her head like an itch she couldn’t scratch. But she tried to convince herself it wasn’t disappointment as she made her way through the untouched bedroom to the cracked closet door.

She almost dropped the tray when she found Malfoy, though in his usual position on the floor, dressed in fresh clothes, his white blonde hair fanned out behind him on the rug, freshly washed and gleaming.

Before his head turned and he looked up at her.

Chapter End Notes

See you next Friday!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Hello…" Hermione felt strangely shy as Malfoy's gray eyes flicked over her before falling back to the clothes across from him.

Carefully she set the tray down on the rug close to his shin before settling down on her usual spot, smoothing the skirt around her knees. He was dressed in a pair of black silk sleep pants and what looked to be a plain black t-shirt. There were scars etched across his biceps and forearms, nicks and scratches that looked similar to the ones she'd had after the battle, though they had been healed within a day thanks to dittany.

The only scar she bore now from the war was the word carved into her forearm, covered by a glamor her magic maintained day and night.

Malfoy, it seemed, had not been given that privilege. His right hand covered his forearm where she knew a mess of old scars lay atop the faded dark mark — ones she assumed were self-inflicted — and she wondered if he'd covered it deliberately when he heard her arrive.

"You changed," she hedged, picking up her goblet of wine and taking a long sip.

A pink flush crept across his throat, but he nodded, and she watched as his index finger traced a jagged scar across his forearm. Hermione took another sip, noting the slow rise and fall of his chest for a long moment before she put down her goblet and picked up her bowl of pasta.

"How was work?"

The fork froze halfway to her mouth and Hermione blinked. It was undeniably Malfoy's voice — she could have picked out that heavy rasp anywhere. Slowly, she looked up from the plate. He was still staring at the clothes but there was something more… *awake* within his expression.

"It was fine," she said, a little stilted. "Would you—would you like me to tell you about it?"

Another small nod, the flush across his throat climbing to his cheeks. So, she put down her plate and, in as much exciting detail as she could, she told Malfoy all about the illegal dragon trading case she and Dean were working on. How they were close to figuring out where the supplier was located, though Hermione was sure it was Finland from the majority of the breeds of dragons being seized across Great Britain.

And then she went back the beginning of her morning, telling him about the weather outside, how it felt to be back at work after a week at the manor (strange and a little overwhelming), though she left out the stares and conversation she'd had with Harry and Ron. Instead, she

told him about the awful lunch she had, scarfing down half a bagel and forgetting about the other when she got lost in her work.

Malfoy's knee shifted, nudging the plate of pasta just a little closer to her and Hermione's mouth twisted with a smile. She picked back up the pasta, twirling some around her fork.

"Would you like to join me?" The words felt odd coming out of her mouth and she waited for the predictable silence.

But Malfoy took a deep breath, shoulders tensing. The hand covering his forearm spread wide before he slowly pushed himself to a seat. Hermione bit her lip to fight the smile threatening to creep across her cheeks in favor of shoving a forkful of pasta into her mouth. She tried her best to give him privacy as he settled himself against the wall beside her, but from the corner of her eye caught the way his chest rose and fell with labored breaths, the tremor in his hand as he reached for the bowl of soup.

Without thinking, Hermione grabbed the bowl as she might have for Harry or Ron, passing it to him. But Malfoy froze, a muscle twitching in his jaw and her stomach twisted.

"I don't need your help." The words were raw, as if they were blood slipping out of a wound. His hands did not wrap around the bowl and after a moment, she lowered it back onto the tray. "You… You are not my wife so there's no use in acting like one."

Hermione knew that he was right — that deep down where it counted, she was not his wife. And yet the words sliced across her chest like the cruciatus. She had spent the last week holed up in this closet with him at night, reading to him, encouraging him. Shame prickled across the back of her neck, sleuthing down through her chest to pool like a dead weight in her stomach.

The horrible realization that she had expected more from him had her placing down her bowl of pasta and rising to her feet. She picked up the goblet of wine and, without a word, left his room, refusing to give herself the satisfaction of slamming the connecting door behind her.

When she woke the next morning, Hermione found that she wasn't quite sure if she wanted to get out of bed. She dreaded the looks, the whispers behind her back, but she knew she couldn't stand the stillness of the manor — it felt here as if she had fallen into an empty crypt. And so, with practiced movements she rose, smoothing back her curls and dressed carefully in her favorite skirt and blouse. It was easy not to look in the mirror, to avoid her reflection and what she might find there. Last night's events still burned her cheeks, her mind replaying over and over Malfoy's cold expression, the words that hurt more than they should.

The atrium was just as full as the morning before, though this time a flash of a camera greeted her before wide shoulders stepped in front of Hermione, shielding her from view.

"Harry," she complained. It was a gift of hers, to infuse all her frustration and worry into his name.

But he didn't rise to the bait, only placed a hand between her shoulders protectively to guide her towards the lifts. She knew his other hand was hovering on the wand settled in his holster and her cheeks burned, now with the embarrassment of looking as if she needed an escort. As if she thought so highly of herself now as *Lady Malfoy.*

Godric. Was she going to have to change her name?

They spent the ride in silence, Harry observing her every breath with a shrewdness only someone who had seen you at your worst and best could have. It didn't surprise her when he followed to her desk, throwing up a silencing charm along with a modified *muffliato* to keep a wider boundary around her door.

"Tell me what happened," Harry directed with the full force of his auror training.

Hermione clicked her tongue in an approximation of impatience, shuffling the papers on his desk. "Nothing. Nothing happened."

Harry leant against the opposite wall; arms crossed over his chest. "Ah, yeah? So why is it you look like you just got the *public loo* Bertie Botts flavor?"

With an exasperated sigh that sent her papers flying, she rushed to grab them. Her hands splayed wide on the desk, head hanging limply on her neck, and again she saw Malfoy's face in her mind.

So, in a quiet voice, she explained what happened. The unspoken misstep she'd made, the words that hurt more than she thought they should. How she could not quite understand what it was she'd done wrong.

"Do you want to know my opinion or do you want me to tell you everything is going to be okay and buy you a croissant?" Harry asked, voice gentle.

"I want you to tell me everything is okay and buy me a croissant," she replied in a monotone.

"Well, too bad." The auror robes rustled with his shrug before he threw himself into the uncomfortable chair in front of her desk. "You rushed him, Hermione."

A spike of embarrassment shot down her spine. "I did not."

Harry's brows raised, the lightning scar rippling with the movement. "Didn't you? That was a huge step for him. Not only to ask you a question, but to then… you know… sit up?" He shook his head, leaning forward on his elbows. "And then you rushed him."

"I helped him with his—"

"You *rushed* him. A man who has been out of Azkaban for less than a fortnight and has yet to leave the safety of a closet. A man who was once a boy who refused to rely on anyone, who only by threat of death was willing to accept help from a wizard who was killed moments later."

Hermione spluttered, her hands fisting into the parchment before her before she smoothed it. “It was nothing.”

Her best friend blinked. “To you? To me? Of course it was nothing. But to him? That little act of kindness after you have already saved his life? It was a step too far too fast.”

The words hit her like a series of slaps to the face. She chewed on the inside of her lip, eyes flicking back and forth before her as if she were reading text on a page. Harry was content to watch as her brain worked, it seemed as he had for so many years. She thought through all he said, weighing it against the evidence she’d gathered before, finally, her shoulders slumped and her forehead hit the table with a *thunk*.

For the rest of the day, she wondered if perhaps they had lost any ground they might have gained. What exactly would she come back to tonight? Would he be in the same clothes from yesterday? Her walk down to the cafeteria didn’t help her anxiety. Each step was punctuated by another person turning, nudging their companion. A stranger called out to her, another reached for her elbow to stop her from walking away. She abandoned any hope of lunch and raced back to her office as quickly as she could, throwing herself into the seat with ragged breaths and pressed her fingertips to her lids.

This will pass. This will pass. This will pass.

Hermione had decided to work late until Cormac McLaggen swaggered into her office at ten ‘til intent on inviting her out for a drink and sent her scrambling towards the floo.

“I mean, it’s not like you’re *really* married to him,” were the only words she was able to make out from Cormac before she slid into the grate and stumbled out onto the marble floor of the manor.

The walk up the stairs felt more like a funeral march as she stripped off her outer robes, throwing them unceremoniously onto the floor of her bedroom promising herself she’d clean them up later. Their usual tray appeared a moment later, a much heartier soup than the night before for Malfoy and this time a roast for her.

“Lottie,” she called softly.

The house elf appeared with a *pop*, looking expectantly up at her. “Yes mistress?”

“Would you mind taking Malfoy his dinner? I don’t believe it would be wise—”

“Master Draco only eats the food mistress brings,” Lottie said quickly, cutting across her.

Hermione’s mouth snapped shut. “Surely not.”

Lottie nodded enthusiastically, running a tiny hand over her perfectly pressed tea towel. “Lottie is telling the truth. Lottie brings Master Draco breakfast and lunch but Master Draco is not eating it, no he is not. He waits for Mistress to bring his food.”

A rush of air escaped her lungs and she clutched the edge of the bedframe. “He told you that?”

The little elf's brows furrowed. "Master Draco is not saying much of anything, but Lottie has eyes."

And with that, the elf disappeared with another *pop*.

"Bugger," Hermione cursed.

Wishing to delay the inevitable as long as she could, she slipped out of her work clothing and into her comfiest clothes. If she was walking into a battle, she preferred not to be wearing a pencil skirt.

When she could no longer put it off, she grabbed up the tray with a little more force than necessary and made her way into Malfoy's bedroom, stopping only to knock at the last moment. Before she entered, she took a deep breath, reminding herself of what Harry had said that morning.

You rushed him.

As quietly as she could, she made her way over to the closet, toeing it open with one socked foot. A small squeak of surprise slipped through her lips and she stumbled back a step, the tray rattling before she righted it.

Malfoy was sitting against the wall as he had yesterday, but unlike yesterday he wore a pair of soft looking dark green sleep pants and gray shirt. His hair was damp again, loose waves he must have inherited from Narcissa curling around his shoulders.

At the sound of her squeak, he turned his head ever so slightly. "Hello."

"Hello," Hermione replied, a beat too late.

Awkwardly, she went through the usual steps of setting down the tray and settling herself on the floor. Except this time, Malfoy watched her from the corner of his eye. His legs were bent, forearms resting over his knees — the position might have appeared relaxed if it wasn't for his hands clenched tightly into fists, the soft tremor rippling up his arms.

"Malfoy I…" The words died on her tongue as his eyes squeezed shut.

I'm sorry for yesterday.

I'm sorry for putting you through this.

I'm sorry I forced you to live when all you wanted was to die.

So instead, she picked up *Pride and Prejudice* and shook it at him. "I think it might be time for us to take a trip to Hertfordshire."

Chapter End Notes

I am Hermione in so many difficult situations — *just tell me everything is going to be okay & buy me a croissant* lol. Fun facts, when I wrote this I had never seen or read Pride & Prejudice (I know I can hear your outraged gasping from here) so I had to do a lot of googling. After it was done (I wrote this fic in full back in April but waited until Desire & Destruction uploads were complete before starting to post) I went to visit one of my best friends & I watched P&P for the first time ever & it had me in a CHOKEHOLD & still does lets be honest.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Knock, knock," a voice called, pulling Hermione from the pile of parchment in front of her.

Hermione groaned, ready to tell whoever it was coming to ask her again about her marriage to Malfoy to sod off, only to find Pansy and Theo standing in the doorway.

"It seems they'll let just about any old riff raff in here." Theo's face split into a smile while he surveyed her mess of an office.

They were so close to cracking the dragon trading case, especially based on the pile of parchment scattered across her desk and over the walls. But unlike most cases, it hadn't consumed her — not like it would have in the past. Now she found herself preoccupied with Malfoy and the strange routine they'd found. Since Tuesday when she'd come into find him sitting up, the last two evenings had been well… not enjoyable, but far better than before.

Last night she'd finally witnessed him eat. It was heartbreaking and a little horrifying the way he'd hunched over his bowl like a dog with scraps, choking on the broth for how quickly he tried to shove it into his mouth. She resisted the urge to slow him or to pat his back when he choked. Instead, she'd focused on her own plate, blinking back burning tears that a person could be reduced to *this*.

They did not speak much — well, Malfoy didn't. Hermione continued to read and fill him in on her day, leaving out the increasingly alarming attention she was receiving or the fact that she'd started using the private floo in the back of the auror's office instead of using the ones in the atrium. But she could have sworn his lips twitched when she told him about Harry. He'd had a fumble with a pair of cursed mittens out in the field and had to go to St. Mungos to have his nose regrown.

Hermione shook herself, refocusing on the two standing in her door. "Is everything okay? Is M—"

"He's fine," Pansy soothed, walking through the door as if it was her office and perching on the edge of Hermione's desk.

Those dark green eyes flicked over Hermione's mussed blouse and trouser ensemble and she could have sworn a flash of nausea passed over Pansy's face before she smoothed it. Theo followed close behind, hands in the pockets of his perfectly pressed slacks.

"We've come to whisk you away for lunch," he explained, gesturing grandly towards the open door.

Hermione was shaking her head before the words had finished leaving his mouth. "Thank you so much, both of you, but no—"

Pansy wrenched her out of her seat, linking arms a bit too tightly for her liking. “Theo, grab her sad excuse for a coat, will you?”

“Pansy I said—”

“It’s this gorgeous little Italian bistro Theo found,” she said loudly, tugging Hermione towards the lifts.

“—I have so much—"

“Their tiramisu is some of the best I’ve had and I spent half my childhood in Rome.” Pansy nodded towards the golden grates. “Theo, would you, love?”

Theo grinned, bounding forward to draw open the grate of the lift so Pansy could maneuver them in.

“Really, I appreciate it so much—”

“You are so welcome, Granger, really,” Pansy answered.

When Hermione turned to Theo, it was to see him biting back his laughter and mouthing *resistance is futile* at her. The lift door came to a stop and Theo exited first, waiting for Pansy to tug her through and towards the floo.

“That’s Hermione Granger,” a witch hissed to her friend.

“Did you read how she married that Death Eater?” her friend answered in a voice far too loud.

“Did you bit—” Pansy’s words were cut off by Theo’s hand wrapping around her mouth and nodding to the two witches.

“Good afternoon, ladies. Might want to get to your destination before you find yourself hexed six ways to Sunday.”

The witches gaped at Theo before scuttling off towards the cafeteria. But Hermione’s name, tangled with Malfoy’s, followed them through the atrium. With each step Theo slid closer until she was flanked by the pair, his hand curling protectively around her shoulder and Pansy’s wrapped around her elbow.

They were settled in the quaint Italian bistro before the Slytherins broached the subject.

“How long has this been going on?” Theo asked, stirring his coffee slowly.

“My love affair with espresso?” Hermione clarified, lowering the cup she’d all but devoured.

Pansy snorted, but for once Theo didn’t smile. “The attention. It was a madhouse in there.”

Hermione waved the worry away. “It’s nothing, it’ll pass,”

Theo reached across the small table to grab onto her hand, thumb resting over her knuckles. “Hermione, there were people following us to the floo.”

She grimaced. “I didn’t see anyone…”

A cup landed on its saucer with a *clink* and Pansy huffed, running a hand through her bob before smoothing it. “How long has it been going on?”

The waitress returned with their orders. Silence fell while the plates were distributed and coffees were refilled. She tried to use that time to put together an argument for why it wasn’t important but all she could manage was:

“Since I came back to work last week.” Pansy opened her mouth but Hermione cut across her. “I’m no stranger to gossip, Pansy. People will talk for the next week and then something else will come along and everyone will forget about it.”

“I don’t know if that’s quite true…” Theo murmured, cutting pieces of his chicken into smaller bites.

“Look just drop it, okay? What is it you needed to talk to me about?” Hermione’s tone was sharp, a small door cracking to show just a little of the mess behind the wall of her mind.

If she was being perfectly honest, the attention bothered her more than she would ever let on. It made her skin crawl to have so many eyes on her, to hear the whisper of her name. There had been a few headlines she’d caught from the Prophet, all centered around *the golden girl* aligning herself with the *Death Eater prince* or *Voldemort’s soldier*. As if Malfoy hadn’t been a child when he’d been marked under threat but You-Know-Who’s second in command.

Pansy and Theo froze in the perfect expression of confusion and table manners from the immaculate way they held their cutlery.

“Draco said—” Theo started.

“Malfoy *said?”* Hermione gaped.

Pansy pursed her lips, shaking out her hair before attacking her salad with gusto. “He’s spoken a bit more in the last few days. But this morning he mentioned you weren’t eating lunch and so we thought we’d come to make sure you do.”

She knew that Pansy and Theo arrived each morning to meet with Malfoy after she left for work. Blaise was a little more sporadic due to his job with the French vineyard he ran marketing for but he made sure to be there at least a few times during the week. It was Blaise that showed up early Saturday and Sunday, whose deep voice she could hear occasionally through the connecting door enthusiastically reading the Wizarding Paris newspaper aloud.

Hermione shook her head, refocusing on Theo. “He said, ‘*Hermione’s not eating lunch you should go see her?’”*The idea seemed to so far-fetched she struggled to even imagine it.

“No…” Theo drew out the word. “We were discussing lunch and if he wanted us to bring him any. He said that he wasn’t hungry and then, after a pause, *‘she doesn’t eat lunch.’”*

Hermione stared at her own plate, stomach twisting painfully. “I didn’t think he was really listening…”

She’d mentioned her afternoons holed up in her office without really thinking about it, how she had stopped going to the cafeteria — though she’d told him it was due to the noise than the constant attention surrounding her.

Pansy drained her water glass and patted her mouth primly with her napkin. “Well, darling, he is from the looks of it and your dear husband—”

“He’s not my husband,” she said quietly, fidgeting with the edge of her napkin. “He’s—he’s made that very clear.”

“Traumatized within an inch of his life and yet he’s still the same prat we grew up with,” Pansy muttered.

Silence fell as the waitress retrieved their empty plates and set a large slice of tiramisu in front of them. Hermione was relieved when neither one brought Malfoy up again, though it was in favor of Pansy insisting on a shopping trip the following Saturday. But when she finally made her way back to the Ministry, popping through the auror floo, her shoulders felt just a little bit lighter.

She worked for the rest of the day with Dean and a few others in the main meeting room. They were so close, she could taste it, and when her wand buzzed at ten ‘til, she sighed.

“You think it’s something we’ll crack tonight?” she asked Dean, who was rhythmically rubbing his temples while humming the Chudley Cannons theme song under his breath.

“We’re close, there’s just something about that last crate…” he began rambling again about the quality of the wood, the wear on it.

Hermione nodded along with him, ambling towards the door and casting a patronus. In a quiet voice, she instructed her otter to deliver a message to Malfoy that she was running late. With a sigh, she turned back towards the meeting room, attention catching on the note pinned to the opposite wall describing the make of the wood.

“Norway…” she breathed.

“Huh?” Padma Patil looked up left cheek smeared with ink.

“This wood — it’s only found within the forests of Saltstraumen. It’s home to one of the largest populations of bowtruckles in the world.”

They cracked the case wide open an hour later but Hermione found the joy of solving the mystery was muted beneath the itching of her skin. She tapped her nails against the long table they used to piece together their evidence, glancing at her watch every now and then. It was only half past nine, but surely they didn’t need her anymore.

“I’m going to head out, great work everyone,” she called.

“We’ll be right behind you,” Dean answered, flicking his wand over the parchment to gather it neatly into a stack before starting the necessary security charms.

Hermione summoned her coat and purse, already halfway to the private floo. It wasn’t that she needed to go home, but gods, what if something happened? She had disrupted Malfoy’s routine and in all the reading she’d done on caring for those with PTSD, she knew that routine was vital.

The moment the manor spun into view she was out of the grate like a shot, taking the stairs two at a time, heels in hand. Shucking off her outer robes and purse, she sighed with relief when the tray appeared on the coffee table. Eggs, toast, and a bowl of fruit for Malfoy and a small pot pie for her.

She could change after she saw him, she told herself, once he knew she was there. Balancing the tray on her hip, she knocked quickly on the connecting door.

“Malfoy, it’s Hermione,” she swung it open quickly and turned to close it behind her, “I’m so sorry I’m late the—”

The tray slipped out of her grip, falling to the floor. A crash could have sounded through the room, but Hermione would have never known. All she could see was the man standing at the edge of the closet, taking slow, deep breaths, a mess of white-blonde hair around his face.

Then he took a step and crossed the threshold.

Chapter End Notes

Eeek! So excited for y'all to read next week's chapter! Just a heads up that I'm going to be traveling & it's for a not so great, stressful reason. I'm hoping that I'll get the chapter up on Friday morning no problem, but please forgive me if it's Saturday instead.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The tray, it turned out, was spelled to land softly if dropped, along with the contents upon it. However, Hermione couldn't have cared less as she watched Draco take another step outside of the closet, his shoulders hunched to his ears. Pain sliced into her palms, knuckles bleached white with the effort not to offer him a hand. She bit the inside of her cheek to quell the praise spilling through her chest — sure that in this moment if she'd been asked, she would have been able to cast the most powerful patronus of her life.

Instead, she watched from the door as he made his way painfully slowly towards the pair of chairs before the fire, placing a shaking hand on the back of the closest one.

"W—would you like to have dinner here tonight?" she asked softly and, for once, he did not flinch at her voice.

His shoulders lowered a fraction and he nodded before lowering into the seat. Hermione grabbed up the tray, grateful for whatever magic had been cast upon it, and made her way over. But Malfoy was rigid in the chair, checking over his shoulder towards the open room again and again, mouth taut with tension.

Carefully she placed the tray down on the low coffee table and stepped back, fidgeting with the watch clasped around her wrist.

"Do you mind if I move my chair?" she asked slowly, an offer there in the question. "I prefer not to have my back to an open room."

Something shifted in those gray eyes as he nodded. Some of the deep bruising beneath had lessened in the last two weeks, smoothing into pale, unblemished skin. Flicking her wand, she floated her chair closer to the fire so it faced towards the room. Another soft sigh from Malfoy, the tension in his body lessening slightly as Hermione settled in the chair. She frowned assuming when she asked to move the chair that he might have moved his as well.

Either way, Malfoy relaxed enough to take the plate, balancing it on his knees and barely stopping to cut the omelet before shoving it into his mouth. He choked on the first bite and Hermione leant forward but stopped herself from reaching for him.

"Steady," she murmured. "Take your time."

Malfoy paused and heat crept through her cheeks. Had she done it again? Her muscles locked into place, but he only took a deep breath before slowly picking up his knife and cutting a piece of egg. It was the same movement she'd seen Theo and Pansy use earlier that day.

"Did you and the others go to finishing school?" The question burst from her lips before she could stop it.

Malfoy looked up at her, the edges of his mouth tugging down into a frown. It was the most expression she'd seen on his face since the final battle when he'd been screaming for Crabbe outside of the room of requirement.

"Yes, we did." The rasp in his voice was heavy and he swallowed before taking a bite of his eggs, stopping himself at the last moment before rushing to take another.

Hermione chuckled, shaking her head. "I don't know why I'm so surprised. I've never seen someone eat a salad with as much dignity as Theo this afternoon."

Was that a smile there on his lips? It was only a moment, perhaps another tremor, but she could have sworn he'd grinned.

"We cracked the case," she said quickly, desperate to see any other flicker of emotion.

Malfoy's brows flicked up and she could have squealed at the look of… what was it? Pride? Surprise?

"How did you figure it out?" His rough voice sounded a bit more alive, like a true question instead of merely a grunting yes or no, or else a remark delivered like the edge of a knife.

So, she launched into her explanation, the realization she'd had. By the end of her story, Malfoy finished his food and was resting his elbows on his thighs, staring at the flames crackling in the hearth. But she knew he was listening from the way his eyes moved, the soft nod he gave whenever she said *you know?*

And it was odd because she might have been droning about her work, but for the first time in a long time, Hermione felt heard.

The next morning Hermione woke to a pair of large bat ears swaying in front of her face, and a tiny hand smoothing back her curls.

"Mistress has a visitor," Lottie said softly. "Mistress is needing to wake up."

Hermione groaned, snuggling deeper into the pillow. She'd gone to bed much too late staying up talking with (or was it at?) Malfoy. A body launched itself into the bed beside her, red hair flying as much too strong fingers found their way to her ribs.

"Oh yes! Lady Malfoy you must get up, you have a very important visitor!" Ginny crowed.

"Shhh Gin! Malfoy is sleeping," Hermione whispered much too loud, bolting straight up.

Ginny froze, hands still curled into claws. "Did you say, *Malfoy is sleeping?"*

Immediately the redhead looked about the large bed, even going so far as to lift up the duvet. Hermione slapped it down, rolling her eyes.

"Not here, obviously," she gestured to the connecting door, "through there."

“Master Draco is awake,” Lottie said helpfully, drawing back the curtains with a snap of her fingers. “He has been awake for a very long time, yes he has. Lottie is bringing him tea but he is not drinking it.”

Hermione swallowed the acid crawling up her throat, imagining him back in the closet, staring at his old clothes.

“Would you fix us a tray, Lottie? I’ll bring Malfoy some tea.” Ginny gaped, but Hermione merely waved her away. “Stop it.”

Her friend’s jaw shut with a *snap* and she widened her eyes. “Stop what? I haven’t said anything!”

“That look hasn’t worked on anyone since 1994 and you know it.” Hermione rushed around the room, slipping back on her leggings.

Ginny threw a well-worn sweatshirt at her that had been hanging off the edge of the bed. “Here, cover up those bouncy tits before you give the man a heart attack.”

“Sorry, why exactly are you here at the ass crack of dawn?” Hermione grumbled, stumbling as she tried to slip on a thick pair of socks while standing.

“Jet lag,” Ginny yawned, “can’t sleep.”

Two trays appeared on the coffee table, one laden with pastries, fruit, two cups of tea and a large steaming pot along with all the accoutrements. The second was merely a smaller version of the first, save for the single cup and pieces of toast with apricot jam instead of pastries. Hermione fixed her tea, placing it on the second tray.

“Stay here, Gin. I mean it — don’t go into his room. I’ll be back in a bit and in the meantime, you can eat, snoop, or sleep all you want, yeah?”

The redhead sobered. They had corresponded in the last two weeks given that Ginny had back-to-back quidditch matches abroad.

“Of course, Hermione, I would never,” she breathed. “I’ll just sort through your underwear drawer while you’re gone to see what we can use as fuel for this enormous fireplace.”

Giving Gin a two-finger salute, Hermione grabbed up the tray and made her way towards the connecting door, knocking twice before pausing.

What if he didn’t want to see her? This was a change in their routine. It was five in the bloody morning for Merlin’s sake. But she shook her head, it was too late now.

“Malfoy? It’s Hermione. I’m going to come in, all right?”

Swinging the door open, she tried not to drop her tray again when she found Malfoy seated before the fire on the floor, his back to the flames, holding *Pride and Prejudice* tightly in both hands.

“Good morning,” she greeted gently. “I thought you might want some tea.”

Malfoy blinked, slowly setting down the book like he’d been caught. “Good morning.”

That was going to take some getting used to. She’d come to expect his silence, his stillness, and now he appeared more like a living breathing human. Slow enough as to not startle, she made her way across the room and placed the tray down on the table in front of him.

“It’s early,” he said but it sounded more like a question.

“You’re telling me,” she yawned, “Ginny — you remember Ginny Weasley, yes? Well, she’s chaser for the Harpies and has had multiple games abroad. Turkey, Istanbul, and Dubai, I think. Anyway, her sleep schedule is all sorts of messed up and she’s decided to make it my problem.”

Malfoy’s hand froze over the silver pitcher of cream, eyes widening until she could see the entire ring of gray. Hermione leant forward, quickly placing her cup back on the table.

“Is… is it all right that she’s here? If it makes you uncomfortable, I can ask her to leave.”

His lids slid shut, nostrils flaring, but he shook his head slowly. Finally, he picked up the cream, pouring it into his tea until it was almost white.

“Theo, Pansy, and Blaise should be here soon,” Hermione rushed out, wanting to smooth over whatever panic he might have felt.

At this, his mouth relaxed and his attention flicked up to her. Just for a moment, she saw an echo of the boy she’d seen at school. Seen, because it had only been from a distance that she’d witnessed that brief expression. There was something like comradery there in his gaze, amusement crinkling in the corners of his eyes.

“We need to make sure Blaise runs into Weasley.”

We.

The word brought a flush to her cheeks, a smile breaking out before she could call it back. *We*. Like… like they were more than just prisoner and warden. Like they were a team.

Hermione sat with Malfoy as he ate his toast, reminding him to slow down every now and again when he rushed and choked. It was long enough that the sun had finally peeked over the horizon and the morning light spilled onto the dark wood floors, catching in his hair and gilding it gold.

She hadn’t realized until then how much he’d filled out. Some of the sharpness in his face had softened, reminding her less of a skeleton covered in silk. His lips were fuller too, no longer cracked with thirst, but a healthy soft pink. The sharp angle of his shoulders was still there though and she noticed the way the shirt hung off his frame. Making a mental note to continue the nutrition potions, she waved her wand to clear away the empty tray and cast a *tempus* charm to check the time.

“I’ll get out of your hair — they should be here in the next few minutes anyway.” With a sigh she rose, gathering her hair up into a bun on her head and sticking her wand through it. “I’ll see you this evening, all right?”

Malfoy watched each movement warily, his throat bobbing with a swallow. He lifted a trembling hand, running it through his hair before his attention flicked to the closet.

“Wherever you feel safest, Malfoy. No one will push you.”

A small huff slipped through his lips and she could have sworn in another life, it would have been a laugh. “You obviously have never met Pansy Parkinson.”

Hermione passed the morning in the rose garden, Ginny perched on the box with a large hat she’d conjured so as not to burn in the spring sun. When she’d arrived back in her room, it had been to find the redhead sprawled across her bed, dead to the world. Therefore, it’d been with extreme pleasure that she’d woken her, demanding her presence out on the estate.

Ginny grumbled at first until she finally caught sight of the garden and spent the first hour or so wandering through the long rows of flowers before circling back to Hermione’s project.

“Do you think he’ll mind that you’re taking care of Narcissa’s flowers?” Ginny asked quietly, observing Hermione pull a weed from the box and throw it onto a growing pile to vanish later.

She sat back, wiping her forehead with the back of her arm. That had been the question circling her mind ever since she started working on the garden. Each step of her life felt like another move in a chess match where she couldn’t see the board.

“I hope that by the time he feels well enough to look out a window the garden will be done and he’ll be none the wiser.

Ginny hummed, holding the back of her wide brimmed hat with one hand as she pointed her face up into the sun. They sat in companionable silence, Hermione occasionally checking the text floating beside her to ensure she wasn’t making any mistakes, while Ginny soaked up the sun, no doubt adding to her impressive collection of freckles.

“Are you happy?”

The question startled Hermione and she froze, hand wrapped around a particularly tough length of ivy. If Ginny had asked that question three weeks ago, Hermione would not have hesitated. The answer would have been: *yes, of course I’m happy*. She had her job, her friends, she took her occasional days off to the countryside to hole up in a little cabin drinking endless cups of tea and reading every smutty romance novel she could get her hands on.

“I don’t know,” she answered slowly, staring at her mud caked gloves.

There was a weight on her chest that had not been there two weeks ago. A responsibility that laid across her shoulders that felt almost as heavy as the one Harry had placed there all those years ago. It wasn't happiness what she felt. She could not even call it contentment. At times, especially in those moments when Malfoy lashed out or his silence filled the entire manor, she would have called it agony.

But then she thought of his face that morning. The ghost of the grin pulling up his lips. His hair, gilded by the rising sun, and the hollows beneath his eyes fading with each passing day. Those small questions he asked, the revelation of his attention, the concern he'd shown over her to Pansy and Theo. It had been concern, hadn't it? Or just an observation.

She doesn't eat lunch.

The moment was broken by the sunroom door swinging open and a deep voice calling across the grounds.

"Hermione, come in and have something to eat!"

Blaise stood at the top step of the patio, shielding his eyes from the sun. He was dressed casually — or as casually as she ever saw the Slytherins dress — in a pair of soft gray slacks and a lightweight cream sweater rolled up his forearms.

"Come on, Gin," she murmured, pulling off her gloves and closing the horticulture book, vanishing it back to her room.

The redhead jumped to her feet. "Godric, is that Zabini?"

"Yep," she answered, popping the p.

They strode closer and with each step, Blaise's eyes widened into saucers, fixed on Ginny following close behind, a Cheshire grin plastered to her face.

"Ginevra Weasley," Blaise murmured with something reverence, the hand covering his eyes dropping slowly to his chest.

"And just like that, my lady boner is gone," Ginny muttered, flouncing past him and into the sunroom.

Hermione chuckled, shaking her head and following close behind, leaving Blaise stunned on the patio. And as Theo gave her a squeeze and Hermione prepared a small tray of food for Malfoy, intent on bringing it up to him so at least on the weekends he could get three meals a day, she thought she might know what it was she felt.

Compassion.

Duty.

And most of all: purpose.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, surprise! I leave tomorrow on a trip for some not so fun family stuff & I was really stressing out about missing the chapter upload, so to give myself some peace of mind I figured I'd upload it today. So I hope you enjoy this slightly longer chapter! I like to think that in every universe I write of dramione fanfic, Ginny is a fan of Hermione's boobs (there's a reference to it in In Silence & Submission & I also think in The Hunt) lol.

Also!! The amazingly talented aplthree did a heart wrenching portrait of Draco on trial. I've popped it into chapter two, but also check it out on instagram & give her some love. It was such a beautiful surprise & I am so honored.

Chapter 11 will be posted next Friday (July 19th)!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

That was the first night Hermione woke to him screaming.

The day had passed easily, with Hermione making the time to go up to his room so they could eat lunch together. Malfoy had not started on his food until Theo quietly left the room, muttering something about the kitchens and dragging Pansy along with him. Blaise spent the majority of the day running away from Ginny, who quickly figured out this fact and found great amusement in popping up wherever he'd run off to in various states of undress.

In the evening, Hermione and Malfoy had their usual dinner, now seated before the fire. There was something more relaxed about his posture as he carefully cut his roasted chicken, though she'd stifled the laugh at seeing a man with impeccable table manners eat seated on the floor in front of a coffee table. He'd rushed only a few times, catching himself quickly, though a flush had colored his cheeks.

They had just reached the point in *Pride and Prejudice* where Elizabeth Bennett turned down Mr. Darcy's proposal when Hermione had been unable to stop her yawns. A pale hand reached into her line of vision, gently taking the book and marking their place. Hermione nodded, understanding the quiet dismissal, and bade him goodnight.

It felt like only an hour later that she'd woke to a scream that seemed to rip the world in two. Her wand was in her hand before she was truly awake, pointing it around the darkened bedroom, chest heaving. Was Bellatrix here? Was she torturing someone else? Harry? Ron?

No. Bellatrix Lestrange was dead. It was five years after the war and no one was being tortured. It was just a dream.

But then another scream filled the manor and Hermione was up like a shot, careening through the connecting door and flicking her wand at the candles on the mantle and beside table. Another ripped through the room, gut wrenching and terrible, like dragging rusted nails down a chalkboard, the sound of the cruciatus personified.

Malfoy lay before the hearth, no pillow or blanket, writhing on the floor. Hermione's eyes pricked, throat burning with the echo of a sob — had that been what she'd looked like all those years ago? His hands clawed at the thick rug, head thrashing, the muscles in his neck bulging with another rasping howl.

Hermione's muscles locked into place, looking around the room stupidly as if someone would appear and tell her what to do. Her stomach twisted at the realization that they were no longer children, and even still for most of her childhood they'd been left to their own devices. No, *she* was the one who must take charge.

With Malfoy's next scream she scrambled forward, the rug burning her knees as she skidded next to him, hands closing over his shoulders. But her touch only made him thrash harder, the pale skin of his face bright red, a vein pulsing in his temple. Sweat and tears mixed on his cheeks, flinging onto her forearms as his head whipped from side to side.

"Malfoy! Malfoy! It's me, it's Hermione. You're safe, you're safe." She said the words over and over until they caught in her throat, until her eyes stung and her throat grew thick.

Hands wrapped around her wrists, wrenching them off his shoulders. In an instant she was flipped with a forearm pinned against her throat, gray eyes wild above her, small spots of blood blooming in the whites.

"It's all right," she crooned, even as his body shook, as tears fell onto her face mixing with her own. She reached up, pushing the hair from his forehead and neck, cupping his cheeks. "It's me, it's only me. You're home, you're safe."

"Safe." The word was raw, hanging in the space between them before slowly, his forearm slid from her neck.

Hermione shushed him as his whole body tremored. A soft sob cracked through his chest, and Malfoy collapsed, white blonde hair splayed out across her belly. She continued to run her fingers through his sweat dampened hair, his head heavy on her sternum, ear to her heart. Resolving not to move, she held him close as his sobs turned into quiet cries and she continued to reassure him over and over.

You're safe. You're all right. It's just me. You're home. We're home. We're safe.

Eventually his breathing evened out and his shoulders released their tension. Unconsciously it seemed, his arms slid beneath her, clutching her tighter. But Hermione did not move, only continued to stroke his hair, brushing it off his cheeks and murmuring a gentle cooling charm for his flushed skin.

"Safe," Malfoy murmured in his sleep, voice so rough she wondered if he'd strained his vocal cords, hands tensing around her shoulders.

Hermione didn't know how long she lay there, staring at the candles flickering across the room on the bedside table. She didn't know how long it took for her heart to calm, for the tears that wet her temples and dampened her hair to dry. But somewhere along the way, her hand slowed and her body relaxed.

Sleep found them both before the sun began to rise.

Hermione woke to a pillow beneath her head and a soft blanket covering her bare legs and arms, the scent of apples and spice surrounding her. With a gasp, she sat up, only for someone to make a soft, shushing noise.

Malfoy.

He was seated beside her, the fire in the hearth cracking and popping. Some of the hollowness he'd lost in the last two weeks had returned to his eyes, but there was a new awareness there as he looked her over. Hermione rubbed a hand over her face before brushing back her curls, wincing as her fingers got stuck in the tangles.

"Morning," she murmured.

Malfoy shifted, porcelain clinking and she opened her eyes to find a cup of tea held out to her. "Morning."

"Oh…" She took a tentative sip, eyes widening. It was made exactly the way she liked it. "Thank you, this—this is very good."

A flush danced up Malfoy's neck, but he was looking at his own cup, awkwardness slinking into the room. What must it have been like for him to wake wrapped around her? Her cheeks heated at the realization that she'd run into his room in only her underwear and an oversized t-shirt.

"I have nightmares too," she offered, taking another sip. "Though, I suppose they're not as often as they used to be."

Hermione waited for him to shut down, for the shutters to close behind his face but instead he cleared his throat.

"I haven't had them in a while. Not since—not since I first went…" Malfoy trailed off in a heavy rasp, swallowing painfully, but Hermione nodded.

Not since he first was sent to Azkaban.

"What happened last night was nothing I haven't seen before," Hermione said quickly as his lips turned down and another flush crept up his cheeks. "A few years ago, Harry set fire to his wardrobe, thinking it was a horcrux. It took me and Gin a solid ten minutes to put out the flames while Ron had Harry in a full bodybind."

Malfoy's eyes widened. "Fuck."

A small grin pulled at the corner of Hermione's mouth. "It took us a month to get the smell of burned hair out of the townhouse. So, believe me when I say I've seen worse."

After a long moment, he nodded, taking another slow sip of tea. Hermione spied the tray on the table beside him, the teapot, cream, and sugar, a plate stacked with toast, and a phial of nutritional potion.

"Lottie," Hermione called softly.

The elf appeared with a *pop*, a satisfied smile curling around her round cheeks. "Mistress called for Lottie?"

"Would you please fetch some pain relief potion?"

Lottie nodded enthusiastically before vanishing. Though Malfoy's expression was cross, she found it did not bother her the way the coldness had. She would take his temper over the apathy and ice.

"Granger—"

"Who says it's for you?" she snapped. Malfoy raised his brows. "Well, all right it is for you, but I can see the way you wince when you swallow."

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "You're not my—"

"Wife, yes, I know. But…" she sighed, putting down her empty teacup. "But I'd like very much to be your friend."

The gentle patter of rain hit the windows as Malfoy stared at her, eyes moving back and forth between hers. Hermione tried to feel her expression from the inside out, the way her teeth bit into the inside of her cheek, the tension in her forehead.

Then, Malfoy sighed, dipping his chin as if in defeat.

"Friends."

Chapter End Notes

[insert sobbing emojis here] I really wanted to demonstrate how a lot of time with trauma survivors, once they feel safe that's when the worst of their trauma starts to rear its head. If you notice, Draco says that he stopped having nightmares in Azkaban because his body was in constant fight or flight, but now that he's settled & trusting Hermione they all come out. Anyways, that's just a little insight as to why I made the choices I did. Okay byeeee.

Omniluci.estrumbra did some beautiful sketches of our sad boy Draco if you want to see them here. I am so blow away by the talent in this community & it's been amazing to see y'alls artistic interpretations of the fic so far. Thank you so much, Jamie!!

[EDIT: Yes the 30 day requirement is still happening, just be patient. We'll talk more about it next week. xo]

Thank you for all the love this past week as I went to go deal with some tough family stuff It was a very strange roller coaster of the last week but all your comments & support made it so much better.

See y'all next Friday!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hermione sent an owl to Molly Weasley, apologizing for missing Sunday dinner again while the three Slytherins visited with Malfoy. Last Sunday she'd sent a similar note, and had received in return a long letter of assurances and love, complete with the offer to send over some food, but Hermione had politely declined, wondering how the elves would react.

This Sunday, however, a harassed looking Harry stumbled his way into the sunroom, falling into one of the chairs next to her with a sigh. Hermione looked up from the book she was studying, raising a brow.

"You all right?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair before removing his glasses and muttering a cleaning charm. "Molly sent me over with what appears to be an entire roast chicken, mash, veg, gravy, and a three-layer cake. Lottie — that's her name, right?"

She looked him over, wondering where on earth he was hiding that much food. "Right..."

"Lottie was less than pleased by my arrival laden with food but she said the elves in the kitchen are preparing it to be served now."

Carefully, Hermione set down her book, casting a glance out the window into the pouring rain and back to her best friend. "Do you want to stay? Blaise, Pans, and Theo are here."

Harry's cheeks darkened and he shrugged in a would-be casual way. "I wouldn't say no to Molly's cooking."

She laughed, vanishing the book back to her room. "Weren't you just there?"

He grimaced, scratching at the scar on his forehead. "She has it in her head that Charlie and I might be a match since Gin and I didn't work out."

Ah, Molly the matchmaker. It'd been a relief the day Percy proposed to Audrey, thus taking all the eligible Weasley men who were interested in witches off the market. Too often she'd found herself conveniently paired with Percy to pick flowers from the field for the table or else feed the chickens while the roast cooked. Molly still held out a small hope that she and Ron might change their minds about not pursuing a romantic entanglement, but that argument had been hard won over four years ago and Ron appeared now to be head over heels for Oliver.

"Well, I'll go get them for lunch. You might have to hold your own for a bit while I sit with Malfoy so he eats."

Harry's brows ticked up. "Do you… do you think I could speak with him?"

She frowned, looking down at her hands. “I don’t think so, Harry — not today at least. Last night…” She blew out a breath. “Last night was tough for him and I think he needs some time before we introduce anything new, okay?”

Bright green eyes searched her face, no doubt noting the smudges of purple beneath her eyes. “Are you two making any headway?”

“As of this morning he’s agreed for us to be friends which, considering the fact that he wouldn’t say more than *you aren’t my wife* to me a few days ago seems to be a victory. Granted, he still said it right before he agreed to be my friend.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Well, I suppose it’s a place to start considering the timeline.”

Hermione froze mid-rise from her chair. “Timeline, what do you mean?”

His throat bobbed with an uncomfortable swallow and slowly, Hermione lowered herself back into her seat. She recognized the tension around his eyes. It was the same look he got whenever he was forced to deliver bad news to families out in the field.

“Tomorrow will be three weeks since Malfoy was pardoned. Twenty-three days, which means —”

“Which means we have seven days to consummate the marriage,” Hermione muttered in a horrified whisper. “Oh, gods, Harry, what am I going to do?”

A hand covered hers, squeezing once. “Well, I would imagine you’re going to have to have an incredibly awkward conversation perhaps followed by what will be noted in Ministry history as the most awkward act of sex in the last two hundred years.”

Hermione, however, could not find it in herself to broach the subject that evening while she and Malfoy ate dinner. He looked a little better than how she’d left him at lunch, a small bit of color returning to his cheeks as he carefully ate his pasta and then drank the phial of nutritional potion.

“Do you want me to read for a bit?” she offered when their plates had vanished back to the kitchens and both were settled in with a cup of tea, a drop of pain potion and dittany mixed into Malfoy’s for his raw throat.

He was seated in front of the fire, his back against Hermione’s usual chair to face the room while she sat in his.

“If you don’t mind,” he rasped quietly, the muscles in his face relaxing as the pain potion worked through his system.

“Not at all,” she answered with a smile, summoning *Pride and Prejudice* from his shelf only for it float over from beside him.

But she didn't ask why he kept the book on his person, just found their marked spot and read, occasionally stopping to sip some tea. It was close to midnight by the time she was nodding off and he reached over to gently take the book from her.

"Okay then," she stifled a yawn, "well, I'll come see you in the morning before I leave for work if you'd like?"

Malfoy only stared at her with his brows furrowed. All right then, perhaps he'd had enough of her presence for a while, that was fine. With another yawn, Hermione pushed to her feet.

"Goodni—"

A calloused hand wrapped around her wrist, his fingers overlapping. The hand was tremoring, the vibration slipping through his palm and up her arm. They were cold, his fingers, freezing like they had been the day of their bonding ceremony, but that wasn't what made her breath catch. It was the look in his face, some strange mix of fear and hope warring inside of him.

"Stay," he breathed, so low she wasn't certain that was what he'd said.

She blinked. "You want me to stay?"

Malfoy nodded, the grip on her wrist tightening for a moment as if he was afraid she might run.

Looking around the room, she wondered what exactly he meant. If she was being perfectly honest, her back was killing her after sleeping on the floor last night and she didn't particularly want a repeat performance.

"Would you want to try sleeping in the bed?" she offered, gesturing to the untouched four poster on the opposite side of the room.

A heavy silence hung between them as Hermione realized exactly what she was asking. Yes, technically he was her husband, but at that moment it felt like she was propositioning him. She barely bit back her frown as she remembered that sooner or later she would *have* to proposition him.

Malfoy rose slowly, nodding once. Since he spent most of his time sitting, Hermione always forgot how much he towered over her. His long hair fell forward into his eyes as he looked down, hand still wrapped around her wrist.

"Well…" Hermione cleared her throat, taking a step towards the large four poster. "Let's get to bed then, it's late and I need to be up early for work."

His grip loosened until his palm was pressed to hers, their hands lightly clasped as she pulled him towards the bed. It was quiet, save for the thudding of Hermione's pulse in her ears, and she used her free hand to turn down the sheets on the side of the mattress closest to the hallway door.

"Here," she murmured, letting go.

Her throat bobbed with a swallow as Malfoy slowly sat on the mattress and awkwardly arranged himself under the sheets in an unpracticed way. Moving over to the other side of the bed, she paused, a blush heating her cheeks when she remembered that she usually didn't sleep in a bra or leggings. She deliberated, pausing awkwardly at the opposite corner of the bed and made a quick pro/con list:

Pro: You'll sleep better.

Con: You're sleeping with Draco Bloody Malfoy

Pro: He's already seen your bare legs.

Con: It was in the midst of him having a panic attack you dolt.

Pro: You really, really hate sleeping in a bra.

Finally, with a sigh, she shucked off her leggings grateful for the oversized t-shirt she'd bought last Christmas when she'd gone to check up on her parents. With a wave of her hand, she extinguished the candles and fire before removing her bra and sliding between the cold sheets.

She tried not to think about how, an arm span away, Malfoy lay next to her. Instead, she rotated the pillow until it rested the way she liked under her head and shifted onto her side.

"What's in Melbourne?" his rasp was soft but made her stiffen all the same, another reminder that she was currently sharing a bed with Draco Malfoy.

Carefully she rolled onto her other side so she could make out his profile in the dark, the graceful curve of his nose, the soft roundness of his full lips. An aristocrat's wet dream less than a meter away.

"My parents." Her fingers curled around the edge of the pillow, tucking her chin closer to her chest.

"They live in Australia?" The question was a mild one, but there was surprise lingering around the edges of the words.

With a sigh, she shifted a little deeper into the soft sheets, breathing the scent of apple and spice, realizing for the first time that it was Malfoy's scent sliding to her across the small space.

"They do."

She could practically hear his frown, knowing she was usually much more forthcoming with her answers.

"That's very far away," he commented.

Licking her lips, she nodded before remembering he couldn't see her. "It is."

The bed dipped and she realized he'd turned onto his side, his attention a caress in the dark. "Do you see them often?"

"No, I don't."

His curiosity was heavy on the air, she could almost taste it the way the scent of him coated her tongue. But for once, she had to be the one to give obtuse answers. If he wanted to know, then he could ask, but she would not crack this part of herself open on her own for him to peruse as if it were a semi-interesting novel.

"How long?" The words were rougher than usual.

"Hm?"

"How long have they been in Australia, Granger?"

How strange it was for this to be their first real conversation, here in the dark of his room, in his bed.

"They moved to Australia in the summer of 1997."

The spell lingered in the air around her, as if it had just been cast. Her parents had been seated at the kitchen table, looking over a travel magazine when she wiped their memories. Hermione watched in horror as they froze for five long, terrible minutes, before finally waking as if from a dream. Right before they turned, she disillusioned herself, waving her wand to hide all the photos in the house where she was pictured.

Hermione had stood there for longer than she wished, watching her father call the travel agent to make their plane reservations while her mother chatted happily about all the opportunities in Melbourne. *Maybe a sweet shop,* she'd said, *or a flower shop — what do you think, Dave?* Hermione eventually slipped through the back door and through a hole in the worn fence onto the sidewalk once their bags were packed and movers had been scheduled.

David and Jean left that very night, the rest of their things following a few days later.

The house sold a month or so after their departure, though Hermione hadn't known until after the war. She'd come back to collect her things only to find out they'd all been donated to charity by the new homeowners.

"Oh," Malfoy breathed, finally understanding at least a little of what she'd been unwilling to say aloud.

Fingertips brushed her left forearm and she jumped, the touch fleeing a moment later.

She gave her best approximation of a shrug before remembering again he couldn't see her. But she found her throat too thick to answer, so she didn't, allowing the silence to lengthen between them. Sometime later, right before sleep took her, however, she could have sworn she felt the ghost of fingertips across her palm, a hand sliding against hers to hold in the dark.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! Happy Thursday! I'm going on a fun little trip & won't really have the ability to upload a chapter tomorrow so you get it now! I know y'all have been *STRESSED* about the 30 day consummation timeline & I have to apologize when I say you're gonna be stressed for a bit longer. But they're working towards it. I think this exchange about Hermione's parents was really crucial within their dynamic of establishing Malfoy's interest in her life in a much more tangible way. He's trying so damn hard & I wanted to show that how I could.

Also, just wanted to say on here that I'm aware of the person who is plagiarizing this fic & just changed Hermione to Harry. I've reported them to AO3 and I hope that it will be taken down soon. This issue is running rampant in the fandom & I cannot deny that it is one of the reasons this will probably be my final dramione fic. If you see it, the best thing you can do is report the user to AO3. Many are also bookmarking it as "plagiarism" since the person (I'm not gonna call them an author) can't delete them. However I won't be responding to any more messages about it, I just don't have the emotional energy for it.

See y'all next Friday (August 2nd) for Chapter 13!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Waking up was strange.

First, it was the realization that the hangings above her were black, not white. Second, that the room was a wash of silver, emerald, and gray. Third, that Draco Malfoy was setting a cup of tea on the dark wood bedside table.

“Granger, it’s time to get up.”

Merlin, had Hermione slipped into another dimension?

With a groan, she pushed herself up in bed, shaking her hair out of her face. Summoning her wand, she cast a tempus charm and lit the bedside lamp. Half past five, plenty of time to get up and get to work by half six. How had he known that was when she woke on the weekdays?

Malfoy wandered into the bathing chamber, she assumed, to give her some space. But when she looked over to his side of the bed — well not *his* side, it was all his bed— it looked relatively unmussed, as if he’d already made it, folding back the sheets making it appear as if he had not slept in them at all.

She touched the sheets to find they were cold as well. How long had he been awake?

Taking a long drink of her tea, she finally pushed herself to her feet, padding quietly over to the connecting door to dress and ready for work, wondering if she should come back to eat with him before she left. Would this be the time to broach the subject of their… consummation?

By the time she dressed and knocked on the door, her stomach was fluttering and the back of her neck dewed with sweat. She had slept in the same bed as *Draco Malfoy* and now they were going to have breakfast and she’d be telling him that they should probably get to it or else all this work had been for naught.

The idea of having sex with him was as odd as the thought of sleeping in the same bed with him had been. She tried to imagine what he’d look like on top of her, the feeling of his body pressed to hers. Would he be loud? Would he finally find himself lost in something other than darkness and pain?

She cleared her throat, shaking away the thought and the image conjured into her mind. *His long hair swept to one side, lids half closed, the pale skin of his chest gleaming with—*

“Are you all right?” his voice was soft, a little less of a rasp than last night.

Malfoy stood beside the coffee table, dressed in a pair of black slacks and a dark gray cashmere sweater. His hair was loose around his face, grazing the top of his chest and tucked behind one ear.

“Uh, yes, I ju—hungry.”

By Wednesday she still hadn’t brought up the timeline to Malfoy, though there had been plenty of opportunities. Especially considering she slept in his bed for the last three nights. The mystery of why his side of the bed looked so neat had been solved Monday night by the nightmare he’d had. Hermione woke to him mumbling in his sleep, pitiful cries slipping through his lips as he plead for mercy. There had been a few horrible moments of scrambling across the bed before finding him on the floor, curled up on the opposite side of hers.

Thankfully, it had only taken a few murmured words of comfort, though the one that calmed him fastest appeared to be: *we’re safe.* And they’d both fallen back to sleep with her hand held loosely between both of his only to wake with him already up and quietly moving around the room.

Hermione didn’t mention the new sleeping arrangements to anyone, though Theo had bustled into Draco’s room a little earlier than usual this morning, raising a brow at the comfortable way she sat on the bed, slipping on her heels.

Unfortunately for her as well, public scrutiny had not waned. In fact, as they approached the thirty-day mark of their marriage, it only to intensified. The second floor was off limits to anyone without an auror badge or pass from security, something Pansy had thrown a fit over until Ron had come to rescue her from the clutches of Harrison and Anthony Goldstein.

Wednesday evening she’d actually been looking forward to returning to the manor. Conversation throughout the week increased between the two of them and she found Malfoy a thoughtful companion, asking her opinion on the books they read, or policies within the Ministry, or whether or not she liked her job different aspects of her job.

As she stepped out of the floo, she was a bit surprised to find Lottie standing beside another elf she’d only seen a few times in passing. The elf was old, with large swaths of skin hanging off his bones. He would have put her in mind of Kreacher a bit, if he hadn’t bowed his head respectfully to her.

“Uh, hello,” she greeted, feeling a bit like she was in trouble.

“Good evening, Mistress,” the old elf, Brystol she was almost positive his name was, started. “Apologies for the interruption, but we wondered if you would be ever so kind as to make a few decisions about some of the items we believe should be removed for safety purposes or else donated.”

Hermione almost laughed at the proper way the elf spoke, the way he inclined his head slightly as a gentleman might when speaking to a lady. She found it warmed something in her to see that the elves were so self-assured after many years on their own.

“Of course,” she answered, allowing them to lead her down the hall towards the sunroom.

But instead of turning to the right as she usually did, they continued on, the hall growing steadily darker. Gooseflesh prickled on her skin, her stomach flipping once before clenching. Swallowing thickly, she shook her head, trying her best to keep up with the elves as they stopped before two ornate doors.

Cold sweat dewed on the back of her neck and for a moment she saw double. The drawing room, filled with boxes, and another, filled with people. With Greyback in one corner, crumpled to the ground, Narcissa and Malfoy and Lucius cowering in the other. She inhaled sharply and the scent of dust and pine mixed with blood and polished wood.

“Mistress?” Lottie’s voice was distant, as if her head was shoved beneath water.

Her left arm burned beneath her blouse, hand spasming, and she squeezed her eyes painfully tight. But instead of darkness, she saw Bellatrix Lestrange’s face. Those rotted, gnarled teeth, the sickening stench of her breath crawling across her cheeks.

Where is it?

“Not real,” she murmured, pressing her fingers to her lids. “Not real, not real, not real.”

A hand touched her knee and she skittered back, hitting the wall across from the double doors, the wall Greyback slammed Ron into before throwing them into the dungeons beneath the manor.

Oh, gods. *This* manor, the manor that was now her home.

She took a deep breath, trying to pick out the scents that had not been there before. Fresh bread, the lilies she and Ginny cut on Sunday and placed in the vase near the traveling parlor. The spring rain blowing through the open windows of the sun room.

Not then. Now.

“Get rid of it,” she grit through clenched teeth. “Or ask Malfoy. But—don’t—don’t ask me.”

Lottie took her clammy hand and, with a snap, delivered her into the bathing chamber of her bedroom. With mechanical movements, Hermione undressed, lowering herself into the magically filling bathtub while she stared at the opposite wall without truly seeing the frosted glass or the garden beyond.

It took her longer than she would have liked to admit for her breathing to calm, for the numb shock to wear away until she could properly wash the sweat from her body, purging the last of her fear. Unlike Harry, Hermione had never seen a mind healer for what happened in this very house or in the war. But she’d believed that through time and space, she’d come to terms with the mark upon her arm and the black spot upon her soul — as if Bellatrix had left behind a single thumbprint on her consciousness. Perhaps this was an indication she was wrong.

By the time she dragged herself from the bath and dressed, it was well past nine. She grimaced, pulling on her oversized t-shirt from the London Marathon (Ginny convinced her

to run it two years ago and Hermione vowed never again) and padded to the connecting door.

Malfoy was there, seated on her side of the bed. Catching sight of her, he jumped to his feet.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said, the words sluggish as if each one weighed a stone.

“Lottie said they showed you the drawing room…” His rasp was soft and when she finally looked at him there were spots of red high on his cheekbones.

Hermione found that even the unspoken question was another weight she wasn’t sure if she could carry. “I don’t want to talk about it, Malfoy… if that’s all right.”

He gave a soft hum — a noise she hadn’t heard from him before — and crossed to the tray settled on the coffee table. “Eat something.”

Shaking her head, she pulled back the sheets before crawling into bed. “I’m not hungry.”

The scent of apples and spice filled her nose, burning away the last of the blood and dust scent clinging to her. The bed dipped and the scent grew stronger.

“Will you extinguish the lights?” Malfoy’s voice was careful and she opened her eyes. He was staring up at the ceiling, the way he always did when he first got into bed.

That reminded her that she needed to track down his wand. She knew it’d been confiscated upon his arrest, which meant it was still somewhere in the Ministry.

“Why do you even bother getting into bed when you always end up on the floor?” The question came out too harsh, but Hermione found she didn’t have the energy to try to fix it.

Malfoy swallowed, his tongue dipping out to wet his lower lip, but when he didn’t respond, she flicked her hand, plunging them into darkness. After a moment, the covers shifted as he turned towards her, the scent of mint mixing with spice.

“Because, just for a little while, it’s nice to pretend.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello!! It's another early travel day tomorrow so I wanted to make sure you had this! Love y'all!

Have a fantastic weekend!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What else did you get from my vault?”

Pain — no, it wasn’t pain, it was acid mixed with fiendfyre ripping through her arm. Hermione screamed, vocal cords tearing, the taste of iron coating her tongue. Filthy hair tickled her cheek and she tried to jerk away only to find herself pinned to the rug beneath her, growing steadily wetter with her blood.

“Tell me little girl: what did else did you take from my vault!”

Another scream, black spots bursting across her eyes.

“Nothing, we didn’t take anything.” But the words were more a moan of agony. “Please.”

Lightning struck, her back bowed, muscles clenched and she could not breathe. Not as it skittered through her veins, as her lungs locked and she seized.

“Granger.”

A cackle rippled through her ears.

“Granger, wake up.”

Claws curled around her shoulders, shaking her.

“Granger, *wake up!”*

Hermione gasped, bolting upright before hunching over the side and retching onto the floor. She heaved again, empty stomach contracting painfully, cold sweat dripping from her cheeks and dampening the curls around her face.

Cold hands skimmed across her neck and she jumped.

“Shhh, it’s just me,” Malfoy rasped. “You’re safe. It’s just me.”

His hips pressed against her as he leant over, gathering her hair from her face as another wave of nausea roiled. But he didn’t stop talking in that low rasp, just as she did those nights he woke up in a panic: *It’s just me. You’re safe. We’re safe. It’s just me.*

Eventually, Hermione slumped and two hands drew her down until she was resting against a wide chest. A shiver rippled down her spine and Hermione wondered when it was the dream had changed. What an odd dream, to be held by Malfoy as he shushed her in soft words, guiding her head back down onto the pillow.

Long arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer and her whole body seemed to sigh. Yes, this dream was strange but so much better than the other. A rumble vibrated through her back and it sounded a bit like someone was humming a melody she couldn't quite place. And with each breath she took, each note of that song, her body relaxed further and further into sleep.

It was well before dawn when she woke again, her head curled beneath Malfoy's chin, an arm slung around his chest. His chin was tilted down, lips softly parted in sleep, a scarred hand covering hers where it rested over his ribs.

Merlin, so it hadn't been a dream.

Slowly, she worked to extricate herself from his hold, sliding through the sheets and careful to avoid the puddle of sick on the floor before picking up her wand and vanishing the mess. It was a relief to rinse her mouth out in his bathroom, splashing cool water on her face to soothe the itching tightness left over.

Casting a *tempus*, she grimaced — only a quarter 'til two. She eyed Malfoy's large shower contemplatively before finally padding back into the dark room and sliding into the bed.

"You okay?"

She froze in the act of flipping her pillow. "Yeah, I just… needed to rinse my mouth out."

Malfoy didn't respond, so she shifted in the bed, trying to get comfortable. Her left arm throbbed uncomfortably, as if the memory lingered in her scar and she sat up with a huff, pressing her fingers against the heated skin.

"Granger?"

A hand touched her back and not for the first time did she realize how strange it was to be in bed with him. Gods, it was like they were actually married. She exhaled loudly through her nose, scratching at the mark.

"It's fine, just—just ignore me."

After another moment, Malfoy sat up as well, turning his body towards her. Freezing tremoring fingers curled around her wrist, tugging it away as she tried to scratch at it. A small part of her mind wondered if this was how it had started with Malfoy and the mottled scars around his dark mark.

"Does it hurt?" Somehow, the question felt intimate whispered in the dark between them as he traced the jagged letters beneath the glamour.

Mudblood.

"Not usually," she answered just as soft, shivering as his fingers pressed against the scar, the coldness of his skin a balm to the burn.

Malfoy gave a soft noise of understanding and, in the faint light slipping through the curtains, she could just make him out: the soft furrow between his brows, the gentle slope of his nose, the way his lips slightly curled down at the edges. A lock of hair fell in front of his face, and without thinking Hermione tucked it behind his ear.

Gray eyes met hers for only a moment before dropping back to the scar on her arm. The scar that was visible there in the dark, the glamour washed away by her nightmare. Her heart thundered in her ears as slowly he lowered his head, the soft silk of his hair brushing her elbow, before his lips pressed to the word etched across her skin.

There, safe and quiet in the deep dark of night, for the first time Hermione thought she could truly imagine how easy it would be to close the distance between them. To wrap her arms around his neck and press her mouth to his, to pull the loose shirt over his head and kiss every scar that shone across his skin.

And then Malfoy cleared his throat, carefully lowering her arm back to the bed. “Goodnight, Granger.”

Before scooting away towards the opposite end and lying down with his back to her.

That morning they didn’t mention the night before as Hermione got ready for work, nor did they discuss it when they ate their breakfast together. Instead, he asked her about her new case and whether or not she thought Theo and Harry were fucking yet.

Bollocks. Speaking of fucking.

But it didn’t seem like the right time to bring it up and so Hermione left Malfoy with an awkward *see you tonight*before rushing towards the door.

All day her skin burned from where his mouth touched her. Every time she closed her eyes she saw his face, the way his eyes pierced hers, the slow press of his lips. There had been an apology there in that kiss, she knew, one he knew he did not need to give and yet still felt the need to say in his own way.

Midday a note appeared across her desk from the Minister for Magic’s office and she grimaced before carefully stowing away her notes and moving towards the lifts. Level one was quiet, with only a few workers bustling about since it was lunchtime and Hermione sighed with relief, shooting Kingsley’s receptionist, Valentine, a warm smile.

“Go right on in, Miss Granger, he’s ready for you.”

Hermione steeled herself for a long moment before stepping through the door. Kingsley was standing beside the large enchanted window beside his desk, staring out into the bustling streets of London.

“Hello, Kings.”

Kingsley’s chin dropped to his chest before he turned to her. “Hello, Hermione, have a seat.”

Her pulse quickened as she took the offered chair. “Have I done something wrong?”

The Minister for Magic blinked before conjuring a white handkerchief to blot the top of his head. “Of course not, I apologize, I only wanted a moment to speak with you in private.”

Oh, so this would be about Malfoy then.

“I know the thirty days are almost up.”

Kingsley let out a sigh of relief. “And?”

She bit the inside of her cheek, a spot that felt raw after the repeated abuse, and smoothed the fabric of her skirt over her knees. “I plan to speak with him about it tonight.”

A soft patter of rain started outside the window, the light in the room darkening for a moment before the sconces on the wall brightened to accommodate the change. Kingsley sat back in his chair, steepling his fingertips before him in a way that reminded her very much of Dumbledore.

“How are things between you two?”

She laughed. “Are you asking as my friend or as the Minister?”

Kingsley grimaced, tilting his head from side to side. “A little bit of both.”

Clicking her tongue, Hermione scanned the room. The walls were bare save for one filled with moving photographs. She spied herself there, the two of them shoulder to shoulder staring up at the ruined castle of Hogwarts but she couldn’t remember who it was that had taken the photo. Perhaps Angelina or Dean.

“We’re… friends.”

He gave a soft noise that sounded more like a question than understanding, but he nodded all the same.

“The Wizengamot, and I would say the vast majority of the wizarding community, are looking for any excuse to do away with Lord Malfoy. I wouldn’t put it past them not to wait the full thirty days before they come to collect him and he is sent back to Azkaban.”

Anger itched at the back of her skull. “Would they even travel that far or merely *avada* him in our bedroom?”

Kingsley’s brows raised but he didn’t comment on her slip, only placed his forearms on the desk. “I don’t agree with their methods or their reasoning—"

“He was a child, Kings. A boy of barely sixteen when he was marked and you know as well as I do—”

“That the killing curse never left his wand, yes. But *others did*, Hermione. And his surname still is whispered with fear. He is a symbol and there is nothing the Ministry loves more than

to use a symbol to their advantage."

Hermione shot to her feet. "Then stop them! You are the Minister for Magic."

The sigh he gave was as heavy as her chest felt and he nodded, pinching the bridge of his nose before smoothing his brows. "I am trying—"

"You are obviously not trying hard enough if the Wizengamot is readying the troops to burst into my home and murder an innocent man."

Kingsley's cheeks darkened and he took a deep breath. "The Malfoy name—"

"Is merely that: a name. Just as Voldemort's was before they made it into an unforgivable. If they take him before the thirty days are up, Kingsley I will not hesitate to defend myself and my family, do I make myself clear? If a single Ministry representative crosses the apparition line of the manor without proper notification and warrant, I will not hold back."

She didn't wait to hear his response. Ignoring him calling her name, she charged through his office and to the lifts, hitting the button for level three before she crossed her arms over her chest and huffed.

His surname is still whispered with fear.

He is a symbol.

The doors slid open and she threw back the grate, stopping up to one of the reception desks and managing a tight smile at the bespectacled witch.

"Hello, I'm here to change my name."

Chapter End Notes

I will never not write a scar kissing scene when it comes to canon-driven Hermione & Draco haha. I think it's one of my favorite tropes. Badass Hermione also makes an appearance which after our girl being so sad feels like a breath of fresh air!

See y'all next Friday!

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Theo and Pansy were at the manor when Hermione arrived home. She was still seething from her conversation with Kingsley and already wondering if she'd again acted rashly—and somewhat horrified at how easy it was to change her surname. The idea of bringing up to Malfoy that she was now *Hermione Jean Malfoy* felt like something she should put off for a while, maybe until things were settled.

Maybe never.

She threw off her clothes with a huff, stomping into the bathroom and running the taps as hot as they could go, stepping in before it was even half full.

"Knock, knock," Pansy called, though she neither knocked nor waited for Hermione to invite her in, instead breezing through the bathroom door.

"Jesus Christ, Pans," Hermione cried, crossing her arms over her chest.

Two perfectly penciled eyebrows raised. "Sorry, who?"

With a roll of her eyes, Hermione shook her head. "Not important. What in Merlin's name are you doing in my bathroom?"

Pansy pursed her lips, green eyes flicking to Hermione's crossed arms and back to her face. "Nice tits, Granger."

"Is that why you've come in here? To tell me about how great my tits are?"

She gave a sparkling laugh, striding over to perch on the edge of the tub and frowning down at the steaming water. "You're seriously taking a bath with no salts, no potions or bubbles, just… you?"

"Yes," Hermione gritted out.

Pansy clicked her tongue. "You're a human tea bag."

"Again, is there a reason why you are encroaching upon my bathing time?" Hermione shifted, twisting her knees to the side just to ensure she was completely obscured.

With a haggard sigh, Pansy shook back her hair, nails tapping on the edge of the tub. "Draco mentioned that you had a hard time last night and that the elves are wanting you to decide on what should stay or go within the manor."

She slid a little deeper into the water. "He certainly is verbose these days."

Her Slytherin friend grinned. “A bit too verbose for your liking?” Hermione lifted an arm, twirling her hand in encouragement for Pansy to continue. “Anyway, I wanted to offer to take over the job if you’d like. I was close to Narcissa and…” She looked down at her nails, flicking them back and forth in the water. The corner of her mouth twisted and there was a brief shimmer in her eyes before she sniffed. “And I think I would know what she would be all right with keeping and getting rid of.”

Hermione reached out, grabbing Pansy’s hand and giving it a squeeze. “Thank you, Pansy, that would be a huge help.”

Pansy sighed, shaking back her hair again and staring at the ceiling. “Well, you’ll owe me one and that will come in the form of shopping this Saturday so,” she looked back at Hermione, flicking some water in her face, “prepare your tits.”

Theo and Pansy were gone by the time Hermione was ready to see Malfoy.

Well, perhaps she wasn’t *ready* to see him, given the way her stomach twisted into knots from even the sight of the connecting door. Tugging on a pair of leggings beneath her sleep shirt before heading in, she reasoned it would be better to have the conversation wearing more clothes than less.

She knocked on the connecting door, surprised when it opened.

“Hello,” Malfoy murmured.

The image of his lips on her forearm raced through her mind and she wondered if her blush was as obvious as it felt. “Hello.”

He was dressed in another pair of soft black sleep pants and t-shirt, different from the slacks and sweater ensemble he’d changed into while she had gotten ready for work that morning. Perhaps it was good for him to change his clothes, to feel like there was a marker of his day beginning and ending.

After a moment he stepped back to allow her through and Hermione steeled herself as she placed the tray onto the coffee table, taking her usual seat on the floor across from him.

“Maybe one of these days we can try an actual table,” she grumbled, grabbing a pillow from the nearby chair to sit on.

“Maybe,” Malfoy answered, settling himself with far more grace than he had a right to.

She had to admit the nutrition potions were doing their work. Malfoy had filled out, his shirts no longer as baggy as they had been even a few days ago. They spent a few minutes in companionable silence as they dug into the thick stew, save for the crackling fire and Draco’s soft coughs when he took bites too quickly.

“How was your day?”

It was such an innocuous question. Her day was not the thing she wanted to discuss and yet it was the exact thing they had to. Slowly, Hermione put down her spoon, wiping her mouth with her napkin.

“Kingsley summoned me for a meeting.”

Malfoy froze before he slowly put down his spoon as well. “A meeting.”

She nodded, swallowing the lump of potato that now felt permanently lodged in her throat. “It’s been twenty-six days since we… since the trial.”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed, nostrils flaring. “So, he called you in to remind you that my death is imminent.”

“No… He called me in to remind me that the timeline is fast approaching and we would be wise to—well—you know…”

“Fuck.” Malfoy answered curtly.

Merlin, this was not going well. The raw part of her cheek she could not keep from biting throbbed as her teeth grazed it.

“They’re looking for any reason to take you, Malfoy.”

The laugh he gave was bitter and for some reason she could not help but wonder if she would ever hear what his real laugh sounded like.

“So?”

Hermione choked, heat rising in her cheeks. “So, it’s important that we…”

“Fuck.”

“Sooner rather than later.”

He said nothing, only looked at her with something like disgust written on his features and Hermione could not help but remember who he truly was to her: the boy who had made her cry all throughout her childhood, who reminded her on almost a daily basis that she was beneath him. Draco Malfoy had been the one to teach her what the word *mudblood* meant before it was ever carved into her skin.

“You don’t want to.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, his tremoring hands clenching into fists. “No.”

“They are going to kill you, Malfoy.” She leaned forward, forearms pressing into the coffee table.

“They are going to kill me either way, Granger. Forgive me for trying to spare myself.”

Her stomach twisted painfully, dinner turning to lead. There was nothing there in his face anymore, no anger or amusement. Nothing, just like the way he had been that morning in Azkaban.

“Spare yourself? Am I that horrid? You would rather die than fuck me?”

Malfoy shook his head, hair spilling in front of his face. Had it been only last night that she’d brushed it back? That his lips had touched her skin?

“You’ve completely lost the plot.”

An incredulous laugh slipped through her lips and she pushed to her feet. “I think I have a pretty good handle on things. After all this—after you’ve crawled out of the pit they put you in, you’re willing to hand yourself over to them rather than bed a mudblood.”

Malfoy followed, towering over her, rasp heavy in his throat. “You have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about.”

Crossing her arms in front of her chest, she raised her brows. “Good to see at least your penchant for arrogance is still alive and kicking.” She made her way towards the door before spinning around again. “You know what it is that hurts the most, Malfoy? The fact that I thought I was wrong that day when we had been bonded. That maybe your time in Azkaban had changed you and your blood purist ideals. But it’s clear that I was wrong.”

“Granger—”

“Don’t worry, Malfoy, I won’t sully your sheets for another night. Godric knows how hard it is to get mud out of silk.”

The connecting door slammed shut behind her, vibrating in its frame. She leant against it, pressing the heels of her hands into her eyes and resisting the urge to scream. With a wave of her wand, she extinguished the lights in the room, jerking back the cold covers and sliding in. Hating how big the bed felt, how odd not to hear his slow, deep breaths.

Hating how it smelled of fresh linen and her own perfume.

She would never admit that when she finally fell asleep, it was with her pillow wet and her curls sticking to her cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

The line *Godric knows how hard it is to get mud out of silk* is one I do not remember writing & every time I reread it I want to snap my fingers in a Z formation. Also, the joke Pansy makes about Hermione being *a human teabag* is actually a joke my husband makes whenever I take a bath & I've run out of bubble bath or salts & it's a bit of a running joke, so I wanted to give it a little moment here haha.

In other exciting news, the fic was taken down that the person was just copying/pasting this one & turning it into a Drarry. I am so, so relieved—I've seriously been sick to my stomach about it & unsure what to do or how to handle it. When I got the email this morning from AO3 that they had removed it I felt a huge weight off my shoulders.

Thank you all again for your support, it means the world to me.
See y'all next Friday!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bed dipped behind her.

“Gin?” she mumbled, frowning. Ginny was in Switzerland for a scrimmage, had something gone wrong?

It was still dark, moonlight slipping through the barest crack in the drapes and her body felt heavy, as though she’d only been sleeping for a short time.

“It has nothing to do with your blood status.” Malfoy’s rasp was soft, like velvet in the dark.

Hermione’s eyes flew open wider. A hand slid up her back, calluses catching on the soft fabric of her shirt, before traveling the same path down again.

“And it’s not arrogance to know that I’ve ruined you.”

Her fingers flexed beneath her pillow as cool fingertips skimmed the top of her thigh beneath the duvet.

“Malfoy—”

“Shhh,” he murmured. “Arrogance would be not to realize I’ve stolen any chance you might have had at a real life. That you have shackled yourself to me and traded in your promise for a prison.”

She shivered, a wide hand followed the curve of her hip, dragging up her shirt. His thumb pressed lightly into her hipbone above the lace of her underwear while his cool breath ghosted across her ear. Heat blossomed in her belly, winding through her chest and dipping low between her thighs as she bit back a whimper.

“The idea that you would give up your life and then your body to save me…” A soft chuckle rumbled in her ear, the ghost of his lips across the shell. “I don’t deserve either and yet I’m monster enough to take both.”

“You do deserve it,” she said quickly, breath hitching as his fingers splayed across her belly, barely dipping beneath the hem of the lace.

Shifting, she tried to face him only for his arm to tighten around her, the other sliding beneath her pillow to trap her.

“No, don’t move.” He all but growled. “Just… don’t.”

She stilled, eyes flicking back and forth between the drapes as if she might find his reflection there in the velvet. That hand on her belly moved lower, sliding through her cropped curls.

Anticipation fluttered in her stomach from that gentle glide of his callouses across her skin.

“Do you want really this, Granger?” he rasped.

Did she? She didn’t know how to answer, how to put into words the agony she’d felt over it. Not about the act, but if he would do it, if he could manage it in the state he was in. If, after all this, she still wouldn’t be able to save him. That was easy to admit. What was harder were the thoughts she had on the edge of sleep, the image her mind would conjure of him above her, between her thighs.

“I don’t want you to die,” she answered.

His hand stilled and she bit back a groan, fighting the urge to tilt her hips. Part of her wanted him to find the real answer for himself, the desire that was already dripping for him—the need she wasn’t sure she could put into words and had no idea when it had truly begun.

“But do you want this?” He pressed down on her belly, drawing back her hips until she felt the hard length of his cock push against her.

And because she could not find the words, she arched, encouraging his hand to shift lower. Malfoy’s fingers brushed the wetness dewing between her thighs, a soft groan rumbling through his chest. With an aching slowness she knew had nothing to do with teasing, he slid a single finger through that desire, hovering over her clit.

Finally, a whimper escaped through her lips and Malfoy gave another strangled groan before his hand was gone, curling into the side of her underwear. She lifted her hips, helping him slide the fabric down, kicking them off when they reached her shins and he shifted behind her. Before she could think better of it, she ripped her shirt over her head as well, throwing it towards the floor where he threw his, just in time for his bare chest press against her back. The telltale ridges of scars scraped against her spine.

Malfoy’s breaths were ragged and she tried again to turn towards him, only for his hand to grip her waist. “Don’t.”

With a frown, she nodded. “All right.”

That tremoring hand slid down her thigh before pressing her knee higher towards her chest. Hermione’s breath caught, eyes so wide she had to blink a few times as they began to burn. Gods, they were doing this, they were really doing this. And why was it that she only felt anticipation, a desperate need for him to bury himself inside of her?

But once her knee was settled, his hand only slid up to her hip, fingertips slipping higher to trace her ribs. He caressed the underside of her breast with his knuckles before he stopped himself, hand jerking away and curling into a fist.

“It’s okay,” she whispered, wincing at the breathless quality of her voice. “You—you can touch me.”

Malfoy gave a soft noise that could have been acknowledgement or another painful groan before his other arm slipped beneath her pillow. His hand disappeared altogether and she bit back her questions and the urge to turn again and take charge. She couldn't rush him or this, not when they'd forged such a tentative understanding. So, she breathed evenly through her nose, refusing to acknowledge how exposed she felt. The cool night air danced across her thighs, core fluttering with each breath.

And then the tip of his cock slid through that unspoken desire, hips jumping as it pressed against her clit before retreating again. Two more times it made that path until Hermione moaned, gripping the pillow and tilting her head back until his lips brushed her temple. Slowly, torturously so, he pressed in inch by inch.

"*Fuck*," Malfoy cursed.

He was larger than she had anticipated and the stretch only intensified the ache throbbing through her veins. It could have been a minute or a century later that he was fully seated, hips flush to her backside, his heartbeat tapping out a staccato rhythm against her spine.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"It's okay," she soothed, wishing she could reach back and touch him, settling for sliding her palm over his hand beneath her pillow. "I'm okay."

Her hips gave an involuntary jerk, a desperate, silent plea for movement, cunt squeezing around his length. A hiss slid through his teeth and he gave one tentative stroke. The space between their bodies burned, sweat dewing where they connected. His hand settled again on her hip, anchoring her as he gave another experimental thrust.

"*Gods*," she moaned, arching back, his lips brushing the space below her ear.

Malfoy gave a small moan of his own, the sound so pitiful, so vulnerable her eyes pricked. Their fingers laced together beneath the pillow, his forehead pressed firmly into her shoulder and she knew he was struggling for control. She could feel it in the taut tension of his limbs, the tremble of his hand against her hip, flexing and then releasing to the point that his fingertips lifted from her skin.

"Please," the word slipped from her before she could call it back, a desperate little whine in the back of her throat. "I need—I need you—"

The rest of the words died on her lips as he thrust again, picking up a faster pace. She cried out before biting her lip, afraid to startle him. But Malfoy gave his own cry, whether of panic or pleasure she didn't know, and the hand on her hip slipped beneath her lifted leg, two fingers pressing against her clit.

Stars burst before her eyes, back bowing as he circled them slowly before sliding his fingers on either side. Over and over, he worked her clit until his name was dripping from her lips, her hand in his squeezing so tight she wouldn't be surprised if he had no feeling left. But he didn't let her go, not even as the tension coiled inside her, he kept up that steady rhythm, fingers finding the pattern that made her shatter around him.

Within the haze of her orgasm, his own strangled cry of release echoed through the room, his teeth biting into her shoulder—not deep enough to break the skin, but enough she knew it would leave a mark. Slowly, they stilled and the heavy beat of Malfoy's heart thudded against her spine as they lay there in the dark, his cock still buried deep.

The silence stretched until it was an observer in the room to what they'd done, as if the Ministry was there, checking it off their list. But Malfoy did not pull out and, after a moment, she felt whatever small resistance he'd clung to crack as the hand on her hip wound around her waist and he tucked her tighter to his chest. That soft hum began in the back of his throat, the same song he'd used to soothe her after her nightmare, and sleep, for once, came soft and easy.

But when she woke in the soft morning light of dawn, it was to find herself very much alone with only the evidence of what they'd done dried between her thighs.

Chapter End Notes

WELP.

I don't have much to say here lol. When I was writing this back in April I thought really hard about how I wanted to handle this scene. I tried to find that balance between his trauma, their desires, the stakes, & then also the fact that it's... well... you know—*fiction* so I hope I was successful.

See you next Friday!

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Hermione tentatively came into Malfoy's room for breakfast, it was to find it seemingly empty. He wasn't waiting in his spot by the fire nor seated on her side on the bed. Pulse thudding in her throat, she finally opened the closet door.

Malfoy was seated with his back to the wall, forearms resting on his knees, staring at the rack of black and gray robes before him.

"Malfoy…"

He flinched, eyes squeezing shut and hands clenching into fists. But he said nothing as she stood there and if it hadn't been for the tremor in his hands or the way his shoulders hiked up to his ears, she could have pretended he didn't know she was there.

Something sharp spiked through Hermione's chest at the sight of him. She opened her mouth to speak, to say something—anything—before it closed again, berating herself for being surprised that he had retreated.

It has nothing to do with your blood status.

I've ruined you.

After a long moment, she exhaled and nodded, backing out of the closet slowly and closed the door. She ignored the ache between her thighs and the tender bite on her shoulder he'd left behind, as she made her way down to the traveling parlor. And by the time she made it to her desk, she was sure she had mastered it—the coldness he was so adept at. Sure that she had built a wall of ice between falling asleep with him still buried deep inside her, cocooned in his arms, and the emptiness of the morning.

"Hey, Mione, you're here early…" Harry wandered into her office, Ron on his heels.

She turned, ready to give him a smile, to explain she wanted to get a jump on her tasks, but when she opened her mouth all that came out was a quiet sob. Her hands clasped tightly together between her knees and she curled forward on herself, the gray fabric of her dress turning black with her tears.

Hands closed over her shoulders while her office door shut, Ron's whispered *muffliato* barely audible. Harry lowered to his knees, gently tugging her hands to clasp them between his before Ron came to stand beside them, a hand tenderly placed between her shoulders.

"It's okay," Harry murmured, pressing a kiss to the back of her palm. "Take your time."

She hated that the war had taught all three of them how to face this sort of agony. Ron needed space when he broke. They all knew it was best to let him leave and that later he would return

looking for a shoulder to lean on. But Harry was much like her—after a life absent of comfort, Harry craved reassurance. It was almost as if he needed a witness to his pain to assure him that it was real, that he was real.

That he had not died that day in the forbidden forest.

It was Harry who took the lead when Hermione broke, Ron more comfortable with standing a little on the sidelines, ready to jump in once she calmed and shift the conversation into solutions. This tiny bit of normalcy was a reassurance to Hermione, whose world felt as if it had gone through a wood chipper and she was now on the other side, trying to piece it back together again.

But she didn't know how to tell them what happened, about the night before and Malfoy's subsequent silence. As she hiccupped, Ron stroked her hair while Harry murmured quiet, meaningless words meant only to soothe, and she thought that perhaps she didn't need to.

"There's no need to worry anymore about the timeline, is there?" Harry asked in a soft voice.

Hermione shook her head, a fresh wave of tears slipping down her cheeks.

"Did he hurt you?" Ron interjected, tension sweeping through his limbs.

She shook her head again, opening and closing her hands in front of her like she might find the answer there between her palms before Harry took them again.

"He's—he's shut down," she finally managed. "Back to h-hiding."

Both wizards were quiet so long she looked between them, brows raised in question. Ron shifted uncomfortably, shooting Harry a pleading look. Harry sighed, hanging his head.

"I think it might be time for me to have a conversation with Malfoy."

"Oh Harry—"

He squeezed her hands tight. "I'm not going to chastise him, Hermione, I promise. But I think it's time for us to have a long overdue talk."

Squeezing her hand one last time, Harry stood, smoothing back his hair and wiping beneath his eyes. "Our shift gets done around three and Theo tells me they usually leave the manor around that time, so I'll make my way over there when they're about to leave."

Brows furrowed; she worried the raw spot inside her cheek. "I don't know, he's already in such an agitated state…"

Rubbing his glasses on the arm of his robes, Harry shrugged. "Then it can't possibly get any worse and perhaps might get a little better." He leant down, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "Take it easy today all right?"

Still frowning, Hermione nodded, forcing her expression to smooth as Ron mirrored Harry's affection and they made their way towards the door.

“Use the private floo up here, okay, Mione?” Ron said, turning back to her before exchanging a look with Harry. “I have a feeling that once news breaks about the sealed bond there’s going to be an absolute shitstorm.”

From the looks she’d caught the last few weeks and the frenzy around her, Hermione didn’t argue. She only nodded again, promising them both that she wouldn’t go to the atrium or cafeteria alone, before they both sent her their crooked smiles and left her alone with her paperwork.

“Salazar, all they need is a moat and level two will be a completely fortified palace.”

Hermione swiveled in her chair, mouth popping open in surprise. “Theo, what are you doing here? Is he—”

Theo lifted his hands placatingly. “Draco is fine. Or well…” he wandered in, leaning against Hermione’s desk and staring at the framed photograph of her, Harry, and Ron propped on the opposite end. “He’s the world’s biggest prat but Blaise said I’m not allow to call him that until he’s crawled out of the hole he’s dug for himself. However, I did get some choice words in before Blaise stopped me.”

Replacing her quill back in the holder, Hermione sighed. “What sort of choice words?”

Clicking his tongue, Theo shrugged before looking down at her. “That he’s ruining whatever chance he might have at something other than suffering in favor of being miserable.”

“Misery is all he’s known, Theo…” She hated how soft her voice was, the heat that pooled at the corners of her eyes before she swallowed and shook her head.

“Well misery is all he will ever know until he pulls his head out of his ass and sees that he’s been given an opportunity that he is currently squandering,” Theo answered sharply, face pinching with uncharacteristic anger.

“So, he told you that we…” She grimaced.

His brows shot up. “What? No, no of course he didn’t. He hasn’t said a godsdamned word since the three of us arrived this morning, but it’s not hard to put two and two together. Pansy and Blaise are with him now but I was told I needed to *take a break*.” He put air quotes around the last words.

“So you thought you’d come to the Ministry?”

Theo blinked innocently. “Can’t a bloke visit a friend?”

Hermione frowned. “Harry’s out in the field, wasn’t he?”

“That’s beside the point,” Theo waved away the accusation, “and anyway, Potter won’t let me within a broomstick length of that tight little body of his and that is *not* for lack of trying.”

Finally, a small bit of the gray cloud of this morning dispersed as Hermione giggled at Theo's utterly exasperated face before tapping his thigh to release the parchment underneath his hip. "So how can I help?"

"Convince Potter to let me take him on a date," Theo answered immediately, clasping his hands together in a pleading gesture. "Just one date, a touch of snogging, perhaps a little over the trou—"

"*Theo*."

He exhaled in a gust. "Just the date then, please. And in return I'll come with you and Pansy to your shopping outing tomorrow to act as a buffer. Besides, Potter and Weasley said it's best for one of us to come with you two just in case things get dicey. Pansy could bring a whole city to her knees if given the chance so really I'll be there for the public's protection, not yours."

Hermione deliberated before nodding. "Fine, fine. It's a deal."

Theo smiled widely, clapping his hands together with excitement before pulling a small box from the inside of his robe pocket and restoring it to full size.

"Fan-fucking-tastic, Granger. Now, I've brought lunch because it seems Draco isn't the only one who needs a bit of encouragement in that department."

Hermione considered putting off going home, she really did. Even after Theo was gone her stomach twisted into knots at the thought of returning to the manor to find him still holed up in his closet refusing to speak.

But when it was half eight and she could no longer concentrate on the parchment spread out on the desk, she admitted defeat with a sigh, packed up her belongings and headed to the floo. The manor was as quiet as the tomb it was most days and she took her time on the stairs, each step another stone dropping into the pit of her stomach.

Perhaps she wouldn't go to his room tonight. Perhaps she would give herself a much-needed break. A long bath, maybe, and some time with one of her favorite books.

Hermione made her way into her bedroom, focused on throwing her outer robes onto one of the chairs, followed by kicking off her heels. But when she looked up, she stumbled back a step, staring into shining gray eyes across from her.

Malfoy's back was to the darkened windows, arms crossed over his chest that lowered as they looked at one another. His hair was damp, but he'd pulled half of it up off his face to expose the sharp line of his cheekbones. She couldn't help but note his clothes, the gray trousers and black button-down shirt, sleeves rolled to his forearms exposing the myriad of scars across his pale skin.

They stared at each other for a long moment and again the silence in the room felt like an outside observer, the bed between them a reminder last night and how he'd buried deep inside

her. The bite mark on her shoulder ached as she lifted her chin, making the memory all too real.

“Potter came to see me today.” His words were slow, careful.

Hermione nodded, but she didn’t leave the space beside the door. “He told me he wanted to speak with you. I tried to caution him against it but—”

“He was right to,” Malfoy rasped quietly, cutting her off. He blew out a breath, hands splayed wide against his trousers. Hands that had gripped her hips, hand dipped between her…

With an exhale, Hermione focused on his face, only to find herself lost in the curve of his lips. She knew how soft they were now against her skin, beneath her ear, on her scars and tried not think of how they might feel against hers.

“I think he might be the only one who understands what it’s like,” he continued, unaware of her preoccupation.

She cleared her throat. “What it’s like...?”

Malfoy nodded, taking a step towards her. “To resign yourself to death, to wish for it even, and then find yourself very much alive.” Another step.

Her shoulders hit the wall, unsure if she would be able to bear his proximity only for him to shut down again, to flinch away. But those gray eyes were flicking back and forth between hers, dipping down to her mouth, to her shoulder where he must have known the mark of his teeth still lay, before sliding back to her face. Another step and he was in front of the bed, the sheets made and no doubt changed, but his attention slid to them all the same as if he too was remembering.

The stretch of him. Those desperate, pitiful whimpers she had made, the way she’d begged. His own cries, his restraint, the warmth of his release, and how they had fallen asleep still joined. He traced the pattern of the duvet beneath one finger, that muscle working again in his jaw.

“Is it selfish to wish to protect myself from more pain? I keep telling myself that it isn’t. That you’ll be happier with distance, that we are nothing to one another.” Embarrassment sliced red hot through her chest and she was grateful he was looking at the bed instead of her. “But I can’t stop thinking about the look on your face this morning and how it… how it kills me to know I put it there.”

Her hands twisted together and she looked down at the floor beneath her bare feet, the red marks on her toes from the heels that were a little too tight. There was no thought in her mind of how to respond, no diplomacy she could reach for. So, she chose silence rather than to scream.

“Are you hungry?”

That was the question he was asking? Hermione kept her eyes trained on the ground. She'd trapped herself into a corner and had no idea how to get herself out.

Cool fingertips touched the skin of her wrist and she jumped. Malfoy was right there, taking her loosely by the hand and guiding her through the connecting door and into his bedroom. But unlike all the other times they ate on the floor, the coffee table was replaced with a small round table and two comfortable looking chairs, complete with a white table cloth.

He didn't let her hand go, not until he'd pulled out one of those chairs and deposited her into it. Their dinner was already laid out but she found she could only stare at the pasta and salad, her stomach twisting into knots.

Is it selfish to wish to protect myself from more pain?

"I'm sorry," she breathed finally, her hands held loosely in her lap.

She could hear that Malfoy had frozen, napkin rustling as it was placed back onto the table.

"What could you possibly be sorry for, Granger?"

Squeezing her eyes shut, she turned her head towards the warmth of the fire. "Because I never stopped to consider what you might have wanted. All this time I have continued to make your choices. You say that you're the one who ruined my life," unable to bear it, she turned back to him, his face swimming in her vision, "but aren't I the one who ruined yours?"

He blinked at her, face slack with surprise, but when he didn't respond she pushed on.

"Do you still want to die, Malfoy?"

That gray gaze held hers for so long it was clear he was truly considering the question. And then he gave her a soft shake of his head. "Not right now, no."

A breath caught in her throat. "But sometimes?"

Malfoy nodded slowly and it was his turn to look away towards the fire, the light of it gilding his features, softening the agony on his face. "Sometimes, yes."

Biting her lower lip, she nodded though he couldn't see it. Not with the way his eyes were fixed on the flames as if he was barely holding himself back from walking into them.

They were silent for a long time after that. And, eventually, Hermione rose from her seat and made her way over to the bed. She was too tired for modesty as she waved her hand to unzip the gray dress, letting it pool at her feet while she summoned a shirt from her wardrobe.

She would never admit what a relief it was to be back in this bed, enveloped by his scent. To know that one day she might slide in just to feel surrounded by him like this made the relief bittersweet. That one day she might wake up and he would be gone and all she would have left was *this*.

It wasn’t long after that the bed dipped behind her and though Malfoy didn’t pull her into his arms like she wished he would, he did place a hand on her back, fingers spread wide as she shook with sobs, sure he could hear them.

And she knew at that moment she didn’t care.

Chapter End Notes

Please take care of yourselves, I'll see you next Friday.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For once, Hermione woke before Draco.

She was too tired to note with any interest that he was still in bed beside her, arm extended, though her tossing in the night had dislodged his hand from her back. But she couldn't spend another moment in those rooms that had become his new cell. So, she slipped on a pair of her oldest muggle denims and a worn *Weird Sisters* shirt, summoning her gloves and horticulture texts as she made her way down the stairs and into the garden.

Do you still want to die, Malfoy?

She wrapped her hands around one of the last weeds, yanking them with much more force than was necessary.

Not right now, no.

Another. Then another. Until eventually the final weeds were gone and she was staring at merely thorns and blossoms, panting through clenched teeth. Hermione knew she should have asked him why, in that moment, he didn't want to die. But she hadn't been able to shake the awful knowledge that it was still something he wanted. She'd been naïve to believe that Malfoy would be pardoned and he would just be able to go on with his life as if he hadn't spent five years preparing for his death.

Harry was right: Malfoy had resigned himself to die, prepared himself for years for that event, only to find himself now on the other side and unsure how to move on. Harry had been the same, though he'd had perhaps an hour at most to come to terms with his death before he strode out into the forest underneath his invisibility cloak. But it had taken him longer than he would ever admit to anyone, save her and Ron, to convince himself that he was not dead. Was that what Malfoy was doing now?

Was he walking through this new life with one foot still stuck in the gallows?

For a while she allowed herself to stare at the fresh box of dirt, knowing it would be just a matter now of ensuring that the roses would thrive—giving them enough space and nutrients to let nature take its course.

The morning light was heavy in the sky behind a few thick clouds by the time she finished pruning the last of the bushes, the bare skin of her forearms nicked from the thorns. The Slytherins would be here for breakfast and sooner or later she'd have to face Malfoy.

She turned, only to find him standing in the doorway of the sunroom dressed in a pair of black trousers and a deep green sweater with his hair pulled half back, staring at her.

Hesitantly, she got to her feet, pulling off the gloves as she made her way towards him. She couldn't lie, not when he'd literally caught her in the act of pruning his mother's roses.

"You're the one who's been tending to her garden," he rasped softly, attention fixed on the deep red blossoms.

She rotated in the direction he was looking and cleared her throat. Rocking back on her heels, she eyed the door behind them that led to the hallway and traveling parlor. "Yes… I am. Is-is that why you're down here?"

He hummed and she looked back in time to see him nod. "I saw you from the window."

And the sight had been enough to force him out of his bedroom for the first time in weeks.

"I'm… I'm sorry. I promise I—"

The back of his hand grazed hers before he took it, interlacing their fingers together. She squeaked in surprise, watching his scarred thumb stroke the back of her palm. Malfoy squeezed and she looked up, the morning light catching in his eyes and turning them silver.

"Thank you, Hermione. *Thank you."*

Hermione and Malfoy spent a few minutes standing in silence, hand in hand, staring out into the rose garden before Theo, Blaise, and Pansy came crashing through the floo. None of them commented on the pair, not even when Draco immediately snatched his hand back and Hermione was left frowning at the space he'd been standing only moments before.

Instead, Pansy ushered her up to the bedroom to change into *suitable clothes for the public* while the boys carefully encouraged Malfoy to stay in the sunroom and enjoy some fresh air. By the time she was deemed presentable—though she'd fought Pansy and won, wearing her nicest pair of denims—and dragged back downstairs to the floo, Malfoy was seated in a chair facing out into the garden, Blaise beside him and gesticulating with one hand something that Hermione was sure had to do with quidditch.

"Time's a-wasting and we've got galleons to burn, Granger," Pansy intoned in a sing-song, prodding her back towards the travelling parlor.

"Speak for yourself," Hermione muttered.

But Malfoy stood at the sight of her, throat bobbing with a swallow.

"Don't worry Draco, we'll have your darling wife—"

Malfoy frowned and that little frown somehow hurt worse than anything else. It was a tiny reminder that no matter what, in his eyes she was still nowhere close to a partner. But why would she be? Friends were a generous term for what they were. In reality they were strangers. Strangers with a shared past, strangers with horrors that linked them together.

"—back before dinner."

He did a jerky sort of nod before falling into his chair and Blaise gave her a weak grimace before continuing whatever explanation he was giving. Beside her, Pansy grimaced, muttering something about stubborn prats under her breath before grabbing her by the elbow to drag her into the traveling parlor where Theo waited.

“What did he do now?” Theo asked, holding the pot of powder.

“It’s nothing,” Hermione muttered. *We are nothing to one another,* he’d said. “Nothing at all.”

When he looked at Pansy, she only shook her head, one of those silent conversations passing between them before Theo stepped into the flames, spinning off towards Diagon while Pansy and Hermione traveled together.

The sun was shining brightly in London, breaking through the heavy clouds that still hung over the manor. Hermione blinked in the light as they climbed out from the public floo, Pansy’s arm linked through hers and Theo fell into step beside them. It was quiet, most of the shops only having just open.

“I think first we should go over to *Madame Moreau* so you can get some new work clothes—she’s open this early and should be able to fit us in,” Pansy babbled. “Moreau has been experimenting with combining muggle and magical fashion into something absolutely gorgeous and I think it’ll be perfect for you, Granger.”

Hermione turned towards Theo, raising her brows questioningly only to have him raise his hands. “Did you really think I’d be able to stop her? Plus, you still haven’t spoken to Potter about going out with me.”

She huffed. “It’s been less than twenty-four hours since we made that agreement Th—”

“Is that Hermione Granger?” a witch hissed.

“Godric, it is,” another answered.

Those gathered on the street appeared to turn as one to gape at the three of them. Pansy tightened her grip, pulling them faster down the cobblestones as Theo placed a hand on Hermione’s back.

“That poor girl having to marry that Death Eater,” an older witch babbled right behind them.

“Poor girl? She’s the one who threw herself at him, didn’t you read the Prophet?” her wizard companion answered with a gruffness that made Hermione’s skin crawl.

People poured out of stores and restaurants, all eager to see the disgraced *Golden Girl*, until a veritable crowd surrounded them.

“Has the marriage been consummated?” a wizard yelled at them. “Or can I have a go!”

Her cheeks burned, nausea twisting through her stomach as Pansy shouldered them through the throng. Hermione kept her head down, thankful at least that the Prophet hadn’t yet learned that the marriage was, in fact, consummated. These people were still holding out

hope that she would *come to her senses* (as some were muttering) and that Malfoy would be condemned.

"Back the fuck up," Pansy hissed, reaching for her wand as she was shunted to the side and the pair of them went stumbling, only righted at the last minute by Theo's hand on Hermione's waist.

"Get back now before aurors are called," Theo yelled, his voice deep and authoritative. "Or I let this witch here lose her bloody mind on you lot. Your choice."

But Theo's words were swallowed up by the crowd, all shouting to be heard over one another, jostling to get a better look at Hermione. She'd known she'd been in the Prophet and had assumed, as she kept telling Harry and Ron, that it was just like all the other times when they'd been children and their names had been splashed across the news. But this?

This was so much worse. This was like when their polyjuice failed in the Ministry as they'd been searching for the locket. The way people had flooded them, chased them, all desperate that tiny slice of safety turning in *Undesirable No. 1* and his companions might offer.

"I think it might be time to go," Hermione shouted over the din.

More people were crushing themselves into the narrow street, pushing towards them. Sweat dewed on the back of her neck and she let go of Pansy's arm to take the lead towards the apparition point down the next alley.

Fiendfyre slammed through her veins, acid tore at her bones. Her skin was flame and ash and ice. And she knew, somewhere in the small pocket of her mind where she still breathed, that this pain was familiar. But she couldn't have said if it was past or present, if she was lying on the floor of Malfoy Manor or else on the cobblestones of Diagon Alley.

By the time the cruciatus receded it could have been seconds or days and Hermione's muscles twitched with the aftershocks. And the only thing she could think as she stared up into the bright blue morning sky of London was that perhaps it wasn't Malfoy that had one foot in the gallows after all.

Hermione didn't quite remember how she had ended up in the private hospital room. Patches of memory were spotty. There was the moment when she'd been looking up at the sky, Pansy and Theo's voices loud overhead, making her wince. She'd thought Harry had arrived at some point and maybe that Ron had wrapped her tightly in a blanket.

The wrapping hurt, she knew that, but the pressure had lessened the aftershocks of the curse. She'd been hauled into Harry's arms, but then her muscles seized and her vision went white.

And now she laid on a lumpy mattress with Hannah Abbott checking her over, the clothes Pansy picked out replaced by a bright white dressing gown with ties in the back that dug into her spine. She blinked, turning her head only for another spike of white-hot pain to slice through the back of her skull.

“Hannah…” Her raw throat twinged.

On her other side, two voices cursed before a hand tentatively reached out to touch hers before she winced.

“Firmly, Theo,” Pansy hissed.

The hand returned, pressure tight.

“Hello, Hermione,” Hannah said warmly. “How you feeling?”

She swallowed, the dry skin of her throat clicking. “Like shit.”

Theo and Pansy chuckled and Hannah nodded.

“You were hit with a pretty strong cruciatus curse to the back, it caused some old injuries to flare.”

Hermione blinked at it wasn’t Hannah’s kind face above her, but Bellatrix’s. A whimper slipped through her lips and then a hand was pressing against her forehead, Pansy’s lilac scent filling her nose.

“Maybe later, Abbott, yeah?” Pansy said sharply.

Hannah’s face swam back into focus and she gave Hermione a kind smile. “I’ll be back in a bit to check in on you and give you your next round of muscle relaxing potions.”

“Cheers, Hannah,” Theo said softly as the witch left the room.

Hermione swallowed again with a groan and Pansy’s hand left her face. The muttering about *how could they not give her a bloody glass of water* lost beneath the cacophony of voices outside the room.

“Where—where’s Harry?”

Theo scooted his chair closer and Hermione moved her head enough to see him, wincing again at the stiffness in her neck. His hair was mussed, eyes swollen, and there was a distinct purple bruise blooming on the side of his cheek.

“Godric, Theo, what happened to you?”

With pursed lips, he tilted his head back and forth. “Harry happened to me. He’s outside, by the way, speaking with the healer since he’s your next of kin.”

A soft gasp slipped through her lips though it came out more like a wheeze. “Harry hit you?”

Theo shrugged, his attention flicking to the doors and back again. The voices were growing louder and she could have sworn she heard her name mixed in.

“Well, to be fair, it was my job to protect you,” Theo answered with a frown.

“But—”

“Sir you can’t—” A witch cried.

Another rumble, this time an answer from Harry, though the words themselves were indistinguishable, followed by a familiar rasp that cut through the rest.

“Where is she?”

Theo stood, taking a few steps forward until he was hovering in front of her bed while Pansy came to stand beside her. But Hermione could only stare wide-eyed at the door as Malfoy’s voice, sharper than she’d heard it in five years, slipped through the crack.

“Potter, *where is my wife?”*

Chapter End Notes

Where is my wife.
Where is my wife?
Where is my wife?
WHERE IS MY WIFE?

Y'all when I tell you I was WRITING towards this moment I am not lying. I knew I wanted a *where is my wife?* moment & I hope this delivers.

See you next Friday!

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The doors burst open less than a heartbeat later and Malfoy strode into the room with a wild look in his gray eyes. His hair was disheveled from how he'd pulled it back that morning, a few locks framing his face as if he'd been running his hands through it.

"Malfoy," Harry called, following him in. "You shouldn't be here."

But Malfoy only stared at Hermione, hands tremoring at his sides, fisted so tight the knuckles bleached white. Spots of red bloomed high across his cheekbones and his eyes were suspiciously glassy as he looked her over.

Harry looked similarly unkempt, his hair sticking up on end. He wrapped a hand around Malfoy's elbow only to have him spin. In another breath Malfoy had him pinned to the wall beside the door with a forearm to his throat.

"Touch me again, Potter, I dare you."

But it was Auror Potter there in Harry's expression, his hands raised in supplication. "You need to go back to the manor, Malfoy, you shouldn't be here."

Malfoy moved closer, their audience seemingly forgotten, barely restrained magic crackling across his shoulders.

"Draco, mate, let him go," Theo murmured, reaching to put a hand on his shoulder before thinking better of it.

Malfoy's body trembled and Hermione watched as that small grip he kept on his control cracked before her eyes.

"Malfoy…" she breathed. He stiffened. *"Draco."*

And then he was turning, releasing Harry with a shove and crossing the room. She hadn't known when it was she lifted a tremoring hand toward him, only aware the moment he'd grabbed it, pressing her palm to his cheek and breathing deep.

"What are you doing here?"

Malfoy's eyes closed and he exhaled slowly, as if he was breathing in her scent, as if it calmed him. Slowly, he lowered into the chair Theo left, ignoring Pansy on the other side of the bed.

"A letter came through the floo, informing me that you were in St. Mungos and—and…" He trailed off, fingertips reaching up to touch the tender skin of her cheek.

She grabbed his wrist, wincing at the movement and the pain it sent threading through her bones. “It’s fine, Draco. I’m fine.”

He shook his head, leaning forward until they were almost nose to nose. “No, you’re not. You’re lying here in a hospital bed when you were meant to be in mine.”

“Let’s give them some space,” Pansy said softly.

The sound of footsteps filled the silence along with the gentle *click* of the door shutting behind them. But a hurricane could have swept into the room for all the attention Malfoy gave it, Hermione pinned beneath his stare.

“But why are you here?” she asked again.

His brows drew together, thumb stroking her cheek. “I told you they sent me—”

“You haven’t left the manor since you got home,”

Blowing out a breath, he shook his head. “Do you think I wouldn’t have cared? Do you think I would have received that letter and merely waited for you to return?” Malfoy rose, shifting until he was perched before her on the bed, his other hand rising until her face was cradled in his hands. “Have I been so cruel?”

Hermione couldn’t help but lean into his touch, allowing it to chase away the pain skittering through her veins. But when she didn’t answer, he sighed, stroking her hair back from her face while his hand slipped to her shoulder.

“I have, haven’t I?”

“I’m not your wife, I’m not your caretaker,” she muttered, looking down at her hands now resting limply in her lap. “You’ve made that clear.”

Malfoy hummed, nodding. A knuckle touched beneath her chin, gently lifting her face to his.

“I’m not daft enough to deny at this point that you are my caretaker.” The rasp was soft, like his eyes. His index finger stroked her cheek and he dipped his head to keep her gaze. “And you’re my friend.”

A flush spread across her throat as his breath, sweet with the scent of mint and chamomile tea, ghosted across her cheeks. Malfoy leant closer, one hand sliding up to tangle in the back of her hair. “More than my friend.”

“I am?” Her response was breathless as she reached up, pressing a hand over the soft fabric of his sweater right above his heart. There, beneath her palm, was the unsteady rhythm saying aloud what she wasn’t quite sure if he would ever be able to.

“You are,” he answered, and just the barest upward curve of his lips visible, before his mouth pressed lightly to hers.

This kiss was not like the ones she had imagined on the edge of dreams. Those kisses had been fierce, full of unbridled passion and desperation. But this one? This was a sweetness that made her teeth ache. This was the golden light of their marriage bond, warm and comforting across her skin. Draco touched her tenderly, reverently, caressing her cheek, fingers light on the back of her head, threaded through her curls.

He kissed her like she thought the worshipful might kiss their gods, with wonder and elation and some sort of heartbreaking hope.

And when they broke apart, he did not skitter back, only pressed his lips to the corners of hers. To her cheeks that had somehow become wet. To her forehead, her jaw. Hermione could only breathe, gripping the front of his sweater as if she could hold him here, in this place with her, forever.

But all too soon there was a knock on the door, Hannah's kind voice slipping through to burst the bubble of peace around them.

"Hermione? May I come in?"

Draco pulled back, but Hermione kept a hold of him. There must have been panic in her face, because he wrapped his hand around her wrist, gently prying it from his shirt.

"Stay," she pleaded.

He kept her hand in his, nodding and returning to the chair beside the bed. When he was settled, their fingers interlaced and he'd smoothed back his hair, Hermione called to Hannah that she was ready.

The witch, bless her, was all business as she bustled into the room, giving Draco a polite nod before placing three phials onto the small table she conjured to lay across Hermione's lap. But she found she couldn't quite pay attention to Hannah's explanation of the potions, the order to take them in, while Draco's fingers traced circles across the back of her hand. From the corner of her eye he could see his face, set with concentration as he looked between Hannah and the phials.

"Sound good, Hermione?" Hannah said, frowning.

She blinked, looking between them. "Uh…"

"Yes, thank you, I believe we've got it," Draco rasped quietly. "Muscle relaxing potion first, then pain, then the nerve repair."

Hannah nodded, her round face a little warmer than when she'd first entered. "Exactly. Two times a day for the next week just to be sure there's no lasting damage. Lots of liquids and fresh air should help, just don't let her overdo it."

Draco huffed and nodded. Hannah gave them a small smile, touched Hermione's shoulder briefly, and left the room in a swirl of mint robes.

Cold fingers touched her cheek. "You all right?"

She couldn't help but lean into that touch again, as if she was starved for it. "I'm fine."

His brows rose, the ghost of a grin playing across his lips. "You didn't hear a word Abbott said, did you?"

"Of course I did," Hermione huffed, shifting uncomfortably in the bed.

With pursed lips, he nodded. "So… you're ready to go home?"

"What?"

Draco reached across her for the first phial. "Take this, it will make you tired but they'll let us take a private floo home. Apparently, there's a bit of a crowd in the waiting room and Potter's concerned about the security risk especially since I'm here."

With those last words, the amusement faded from his face, leaving behind that shell Hermione hated. But he pressed the phial into her hand, guiding it to her lips when she didn't move and encouraging her to tip it down her throat. She winced, acrid liquid washing across her tongue, though after a moment her shoulders relaxed — the potion like smooth silk sliding through her veins.

"Now this one," Draco murmured, handing her the next.

The pain potion was similar, though there was a sickly sweetness she never got used to, followed by the nerve potion that had the consistency of mud. She choked as she tried to swallow, pain shooting up her spine with each convulsion of her stomach.

Draco soothed her with soft sounds, his hand sliding firmly up and down her back until finally she was able to keep them all down. Carefully, he guided to lie back onto the bed, brushing her hair out of her face.

"Give them a minute to work and I'll call Pansy into help you dress."

But Hermione shook her head, reaching out a lazy hand. She'd been reaching for his sweater, but it landed instead across his collarbone, fingertips brushing the skin of his throat.

"No…" she said, tongue thick with the potions. "You."

His lips turned down with a frown. "You don't want Pansy?"

Shaking her head again, it was a relief to find that the pain was gone and she tapped her finger against his throat in silent answer.

Finally, he nodded, catching her hand and squeezing it softly before rising to grab her clothes. It was a slow process to dress her, though Hermione found she didn't mind the feeling of Draco untying the gown, sliding it off her shoulders with the barest touch across her skin. He was patient as he helped her step into her denims, knuckles brushing her belly as he fastened the button. If he noticed her shiver, he gave no indication, nor did he acknowledge the way she couldn't stop touching him. As if they had a mind of their own, her hands continued to find his shoulders, his forearms, even his cheeks once or twice. But Draco would only pause,

allowing her a moment to trace the line of his bicep or cheek before moving back to the pile of clothes.

Eventually he directed her to sit on the bed, kneeling to slip the trainers back on her feet, tying the laces into neater bows than she ever bothered with.

“Draco…” she breathed dreamily. She traced the line of his jaw, skin rough with stubble.

He looked up from the floor, a soft vee between his brows.

“Kiss me.”

For a moment, she thought he might refuse her. Past the haze of potions, she could see he’d retreated into himself once more, each breath another brick in the wall he built to protect himself from the outside world. But then he rose to his knees, sliding hers apart and cupped her face gently in his hands.

Yet he didn’t move once he was there, only looked at her face as if burning it into his memory. Each freckle, each curl, each eyelash a pen stroke within his mind. Then he leant forward, brushing his lips across hers slowly, refusing to give in when she pressed hers firmly to his, curling her arms around his neck. He held her back with his hands on her face, keeping the kiss soft and light, as if he couldn’t bear much else.

And somewhere, in the conscious part of her mind, it terrified her what that meant.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies to everyone who thought the Diagon Alley trip was gonna be a fun makeover montage resulting in a spluttering Draco. Unfortunately the angst train still has some stops to make before we can get off.

See y’all next Friday!

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By day three of recovery, Hermione was restless.

The first day she'd found she quite enjoyed staying in bed, though it confused her that Draco settled her in the white and blue bedroom rather than his own. But he'd slept beside her that first night, their fingers loosely tangled beneath her pillow and though she stayed quiet, in those moments that sleep evaded her she felt his fingertips tracing the planes of her face, heard the soft hum of that lullaby slither through the room.

By the second day she felt exponentially better and though Draco had conceded to her spending a little time in the rose garden, the moment she'd shown any sign of fatigue he'd ushered her back to the bedroom.

Ginny had stopped by for a visit, her voice too loud within the strange peaceful bubble of the manor as she asked again and again what happened. And though Hermione knew Draco was in the sunroom with Theo and Blaise, she winced each time Ginny mentioned the cruciatus and the marriage bond in the same sentence.

On day three Hermione woke with her skin itching and ready to do more than laze about, though that had been exactly what the morning had been. Draco, though present, barely spoke, and she'd noted that his silences had grown longer as the days passed. The sweet, gentle kisses he'd given her on Saturday gave way to merely lingering touches and then to nothing at all.

They were seated in the sunroom, the afternoon light fading from the sky, when Hermione took his hand, only to have him stiffen.

"What is it…" She hated the desperation in her voice, the dread that had caused the blood in her veins to turn to tar.

He pulled his hand into his lap, staring out at Narcissa's roses, that godsdamned muscle working in his jaw. Hermione shivered, wrapping her arms around her middle, wishing she wore more than an oversized t-shirt and leggings to protect her from the chill that emanated from him.

"You were cursed because of me." The words were soft, but that rasp was heavy in his throat, as if he'd been screaming but she'd been unable to hear.

Hermione shook her head, thankful that the haze of her morning potions had passed. "No, I was cursed because people cannot look past their prejudices."

The last of the sun broke across the sky, painting it in pinks, purples, and a deep velvet blue. Its light warmed Draco's face, a contrast to the ice chipping away within him, the firm set of

his mouth, the heaviness in his eyes.

“To them you’re no longer war heroine Hermione Granger, one third of the golden trio,” Draco said slowly, almost mechanically. “Now you are disgraced wife of Draco Malfoy. All your accomplishments just… gone.”

He waved a hand to accentuate the point. She tried to catch his eye, but he turned away until she could see only his profile. But the pain was still there, beneath the layers of ice — Hermione knew him well enough now to see the signs: the tremor in his hands, the wince as he said her name.

Draco closed his eyes, hair burnished gold in the dying light. “I thought I had known torture. All those years in Azkaban with guards all too willing to turn a blind eye to those who wished to dole out punishment. I know the pain of the cruciatus better than I know peace. But seeing you there, lying in that hospital bed?”

He blew out a breath, pressing his hand tight across his heart. Hermione could only stare, trying to absorb the knowledge that he had been tortured by the cruciatus and Merlin knows what else for years. That explained the tremors, it explained the wince at the sound of an unexpected voice, and though she abhorred crying at this point with how many tears she’d shed, heat still glazed across her eyes.

“That was torture, Hermione, knowing that I put you there by merely *breathing*.”

“People will forget,” she murmured, reaching out to touch him only to have him draw away again.

“Our memories are as long as our lives,” he answered, his voice sliding into a monotone. “There’s no amount of time that can heal the sort of wounds my father inflicted — that I inflicted. Five years or fifty, it doesn’t matter. The Malfoy name will never be anything but a curse.”

“So what would you have us do?” her voice was careful, as if she were walking slowly across a field of landmines.

He folded his hands in his lap, gazing down at the small scars that marred the pale skin. “I’ve already sent a letter to Kingsley—”

“Draco.”

“—asking him to revoke the Gallows Law so I can be brought to justice.”

She shook her head. “That isn’t justice, it’s murder.”

Lifting his chin, his gaze flicked back and forth across the sunset, and she wondered if he was cataloging this the way he’d done with her face.

“If you hadn’t been in that courtroom, I would already be ashes in the wind and you would have a life somewhere, happy and whole.”

Hermione couldn't imagine a life like that anymore. The last month had changed something inside of her and she wasn't sure if it was the marriage bond, or watching him slowly drag himself beneath the weight of such horror—or perhaps a little of both.

"It wouldn't be a life…" her voice was small but color bled across Draco's cheekbones as if she'd shouted.

"And this is?" he snapped. "You've spent the last month in captivity and I your jailer. You deserve to have someone who doesn't flinch at the sound of a door opening or hide at the first sign of trouble. Someone who doesn't have this… *monster* living inside of them, waiting for the slightest weakness in order to break free."

That was what they had done to him in Azkaban. They convinced him that he truly bore the sins of Lucius and his fellows. And Draco, like a strange dementor, had sucked up those negative emotions and turned them into a shield against the world and against her.

"It will get better. It is already getting better." She was shaking now, her voice rising higher in pitch, faster as if it might make more of an impact.

"Every time I close my eyes, I see you in St. Mungos and I cannot live with myself knowing that I am the cause."

"You are not," Hermione snapped, rising to her feet. "You are not the one who lifted that wand, Draco. You are not the one who cast it with hate in your heart. Don't… don't take on their crimes too."

But he shook his head sadly. "With me gone you'll be free. You've already sacrificed so much. This stain on your life is the last thing you need."

She rounded the table until she stood before him, but he wouldn't meet her eyes.

"What I need is *you*," she all but shouted, and the truth of the words hit her. Draco had somehow wormed his way so deep within her chest that there was no removing him. And if he left this world…

Would he be free? Was she once again only thinking of herself, her guilt, her needs?

"I understand that I have taken your choices away," she started, tears threatening with each word. "And…" Slowly, she lowered to her knees before him, reaching out to place her hands over his and this time he did not pull away. She stroked the scars across his skin, mouth working with the effort to form the words.

"If this is what you want, Draco, I won't stand in your way again. I will grieve you with each breath I take, with each cup of tea I drink, with each page I read. And if you're right, that our memories are as long as our lives, then that means that I am right in saying that I will never be free of this or be free of you."

Finally, she looked up, the cool breeze catching on her wet cheeks, swirling through her hair. But she could only watch as the ice cracked behind his eyes, as his brows drew together,

mouth tensing into a thin line.

“Tell me you want to do this and I won’t stop you,” she continued. “But you have to say the words. Tell me you don’t want me, that you would rather die, and I promise I will step aside. I’ll hate it every moment until it’s done and after I think I’ll know just a small sliver of what it is you’ve felt over the last five years.”

Draco’s mouth opened but only a soft catch in his throat was audible before it shut again and he closed his eyes. One tear slipped out and she caught it before it could fall, running her thumb across his cheek. And they stayed like that, Hermione brushing the tears from his face as he gave way to silent sobs, until the last of the light died and darkness fell completely.

“I don’t want to leave you,” he rasped finally, each word its own struggle. “But I will if it means that you won’t be subjected to this pain.”

And though she had only minutes ago chastised herself for being so selfish, she couldn’t stop the words from bubbling to her lips. “And what about what I want? If you would sacrifice yourself for my happiness, don’t I get a say?”

The candles in the sconces around the sunroom burst into life in time for her to witness the war raging inside him. And then he raised one hand to wrap around her wrist and she knew that he would push her away. That it was already done and perhaps even tomorrow she would wake to him gone. But instead, he turned his face towards her palm, lips brushing the sensitive skin. Fingers slid across her waist, just the barest caress and she leant closer until her belly hit his knees.

“What would you want… if you lived?” she asked carefully.

Draco thought for a long moment, lips brushing back and forth across the heel of her hand. “I would want to be free of the reminders of our past. To take you somewhere safe, where the world wouldn’t turn you into yet another symbol for their gain. Where we weren’t *Death Eater Draco Malfoy* and *Golden Girl Hermione Granger* but just… Draco and Hermione.”

She nodded, a watery smile pulling at her cheeks. “That sounds lovely.”

“But you have a life, Hermione. Friends, a job—”

“I have no desire to work for an institution that would kill you as a symbol of peace,” she interrupted. “And most of our friends don’t seem to have jobs anyways.”

There it was, the smallest of smiles, only for a heartbeat but it was there.

“What else?” she pressed.

The hand at her waist tightened. “I would want to free myself from the chains I can still feel wrapped around my wrists. Maybe see a mind healer if one would agree to it.” Hermione gave a soft sound of encouragement and Draco’s cheeks flushed. “I would want to court you, I think. To one day feel worthy enough to present you with a ring and really make you mine.”

Her laugh was more of a hiccup, but there was joy there in the sound. The image in her mind so beautiful it made her want to reach out and grab it with both hands.

A quiet life somewhere without all this pain.

“That’s what you want?” she clarified.

Draco nodded, slowly lowering her hand from his face. “Yes, if I lived, that’s what I would want. But… but what about you? What do you want?”

It was a relief to smile at him, to study his face as he had hers, and to finally see clearly the desperate need there in his gaze, the desire that terrified him. All the pieces slid into place, the careful touches, the restrained way he’d taken her, his withdrawal after, the gentle kisses —controlled enough not to get carried away. Not to allow himself to get lost in the fantasy now shining between them.

A fantasy that Hermione knew she would do her damndest to make into a reality.

“I want you to kiss me, Draco.”

Chapter End Notes

If you want to know if this is an HEA, it's in the tags. You can tell at this point I was a wee bit undecided as to how it was gonna go. This was probably one of the most difficult chapters to write emotionally, so sending y'all lots of love.

Chapter 21

Draco didn't hesitate the way Hermione thought he would.

Instead, some final cord within him snapped, and his hands delved into her hair, mouth covering hers until he was stealing her breath when her lips parted on a gasp. This kiss was not gentle, it was not the reverent press of mouths that it had been in the hospital. No, this was desperation, it was the force of Draco's need. His hands were rough in her hair, angling her head to allow him to delve deeper, tongue sweeping across hers as if he might draw her very soul into his own.

All Hermione could do was surrender to it, her hands clenched around his shirt before sliding to grip his shoulders when he wrapped his arms around her waist, tugging her up into his lap. She went willingly, knees perched on either side of his hips within the wide armchair, pulling the tie out of the hair gathered on the back of his head until it fell around his face. It was soft, like silk slipping through her fingertips. Draco gave a sigh as she ran her hands through it, his lips moving to her cheek, her jaw, to the space below her ear.

"Draco," she moaned as he sucked at the spot, leaving a mark, and she knew she would have bruises on her hips from the way his fingers dug into her skin.

He rocked his hips up, dragging her against the erection steadily growing between them. With only her leggings and the fine fabric of his pants separating them from the true act, heat pulsed through her belly. A groan rumbled through his chest and he reached up, bracketing her throat with one long fingered hand to drag her mouth back to his. Draco swallowed each one of her moans as he pressed her down against his cock until he drew back to look into her eyes.

"Need you…" he's lids fluttered and he panted a soft moan. "Need to see you come like this, Hermione. *Please.*"

Hermione bit her lip, each pass of his cock against her clit sent electricity zinging up her spine until she was trembling, thighs clenching around his. She gripped his shoulders, rolling her hips experimentally until they both groaned.

"That's it," Draco rasped. "Just like that."

A shiver rippled down her spine at the roughness in his voice, at the way he held her face only a breath away from his own, watching her fall apart as if it was the sun rising for the very first time. And she did fall apart, the orgasm overtaking her with blinding speed. Her mouth opened on a silent cry, brows drawing tight, before Draco took that too, swallowing the sound of his name before she could utter it. Lips danced against hers, biting until the tang of copper passed between them and Draco was rising from the chair, gripping her backside to hold her tight.

With a speed and strength that surprised her, he moved down the hall, taking the stairs two at a time. Hermione clung to him, riding out the aftershocks of her release, latching her mouth

to the pale skin of his throat over his prisoner tattoo where she licked and nipped, savoring each groan, each flex of his hand on the curve of her ass.

The bedroom door crashed open, a flicker of his magic reacting to his will unbound by a wand. Draco's lips found hers again as her back hit the mattress, the scent of apples and spice curling around them from his sheets. And then he pulled away, panting, lips kiss-stung and hair mussed. There was a wildness there in his eyes, pupils blown wide.

Hermione pushed up on her hands, her chest heaving and she wondered if that wild look was reflected in her own face.

"Show me," Draco said softly.

She frowned, unsure what it was he wanted.

"Show me how to make you feel good."

Reaching out for him, a smile curled her lips. "You've already done that."

And though his lips curled, he shook his head before running a tremoring hand through his hair. "No, no, I want—I need to make this right for you. Last time I wasn't there, not really, and I never…"

He never got to see her when they consummated the marriage. It had been pitch-black with only the barest touch of their skin to connect them. His hand only on her hip before sliding between her thighs, teeth biting into her skin. And she thought she understood what he meant about not being there, the anxiety he must have felt, the terror that he might hurt her.

And so she nodded, sitting up and grabbing for the hem of her shirt before dragging it off and throwing it onto the floor. The small ring of gray around his eyes bloomed silver in the light and he took a single step forward before stopping himself, hands clenching into fists. Hooking her thumbs into her leggings, she laid back, lifting her hips to pull them down before they followed onto the floor and she leant up onto her elbows.

Draco was a man starved; attention fixed to her legs pressed tightly together. Hermione swallowed, heat curling again through her belly, pulse pounding in her veins before slowly, she parted them. At the first glimpse, he dropped to his knees, a groan slipping through his lips. The movement brought him closer to the bed, close enough that he could have reached out and touched her, but he kept his hands at his sides, trembling from the tension.

"Show me, love."

Hermione shivered, lids fluttering before her hand snaked down her belly, fingers parting between her thighs as she gathered the wetness there. She was soaked, not only from her release before but also from his gaze, that term of endearment. Slowly, she circled her clit, hips jumping from just the barest pressure. A soft moan echoed through the room and it took her a moment to realize it was Draco's, not hers. His need to touch her was palpable, warring with this desire to learn her body and what she wanted.

So, she dipped her fingers lower, pressing two inside as she worked her clit with the heel of her hand. A flush crept across his cheeks, eyes fixed between her thighs and the sight of that hunger after days of cold—weeks of it—fanned the flame inside her blood until she was rocking against her hand, tiny moans echoing off the walls and reflected back on her.

But as her body tightened, as sweat dewed across her brow and chests, her breasts flushing with heat, a hand wrapped around her wrist, drawing it away. She gave a soft whimper of frustration that gave way to a gasp as Draco licked up her palm, sucking her fingers into his mouth and moaning at the taste.

"Please," she mewled.

He shushed her as he drew her hand back, sliding his beneath her hips and slowly, gently, tugged her to the edge of the bed. Draco pressed a soft kiss to the skin of her hip, above a bruise already blooming from his punishing grip in the garden. Over and over, he kissed her, his mouth sliding from one hip to the other.

"Draco, *please."* She threaded her fingers into his hair, but he only grabbed her by the wrists, pinning them to the bed.

Still, she writhed beneath him, her body giving way to that desperate movement, too far gone to feel the heat of embarrassment. Draco watched, eyes now almost completely pitch black, before his mouth descended on her. This was a similar ferocity to what she'd felt in the sunroom. Like a man starved, he licked and sucked at her skin, releasing one of her hands to press two fingers into her core.

She cried out, head falling back onto the bed as he lapped at her clit, crooking those fingers inside of her until galaxies bloomed behind her eyes, the muscles of her stomach tensing as she coiled higher and higher.

"Please, please, please."

Begging. She was begging the way she had wanted to beg for his life. And when finally, she reached that peak and Draco sucked her clit into his mouth roughly, she screamed, breaking apart again and again only to come together whole. Before she could so much as look up, his body was pressed to hers, the taste of herself on her tongue as he kissed her.

His fabric clad cock pressed against her center with desperate ruts, hair falling around them like a blanket weaved of silver and gold. She scrambled, tugging at the soft shirt until it found hers on the floor, her hands sliding over his skin, tracing the rippling scars across his heart, over his back. But Draco barely stopped to allow her to draw the shirt from his back before latching his mouth to her throat, nipping at her collarbones, teeth grazing the sensitive swell of her breasts.

And all the while she reached for him, fumbling with the fastening of his trousers, until finally her hand slipped inside. He was scorching against her palm, heavy in her hand, the tip already wet with pre-come. At her touch, he hissed, body stilling and eyes squeezing shut.

"Is… is this okay?" she asked softly, giving the length of his cock and experimental stroke.

Draco nodded, teeth clenching and releasing. “Y—yeah.”

“Move back.” Hermione pressed on his shoulders until he slid one knee off the bed, then the other, standing before her in only his undone trousers, hair wild around his collarbones.

Gods, he was beautiful. His body a patchwork of jagged lines and silver scars, like pottery she’d read about. How artists would take broken pieces, putting them back together and filling the scars with gold. Draco was the same before her, his scars shining in the candlelight, chest heaving, and, in that moment, she thought she could see the glimmer of what he would look like when he was whole.

Carefully she rose from the bed before lowering to her knees, reaching up to draw down the hem of his trousers and pants until he stepped out. Draco caressed her hair, brushing it back from her temples, sliding across the curve of her jaw as if he could not believe she was really here. Her mouth watered at the sight of his cock, thick and ruddy, pulsing with each heartbeat. As gently as she could, she wrapped her hand around it, leaning forward to press a kiss to the tip. Salt and sweetness coated her tongue and she moaned, licking the head before sucking it into her mouth.

“Fuck.” His hands tensed around her hair, hips bucking unconsciously.

She grinned around him, bobbing her head around the tip before sliding deeper, lapping at the thick vein. Draco cursed, bowing forward, thrusting again and again until he hit the back of her throat, tears springing to her eyes. Already she was wet once more, thighs squeezing together to stave off the ache blooming at the sight of his desire.

But then the hands in her hair tightened and he was pulling her away, breaths coming in ragged pants, eyes squeezed shut. His hands jumped from her hair as if electrocuted and he raised them in the air, fists clenched tight against his temples.

“Too much, it’s too much,” he rasped. “Don’t want to lose…”

Nodding, she slid her hands up and down his thighs. He was desperate to keep her safe, even if it was from him, and a painful twinge echoed through her chest as she climbed to her feet, rising to her tiptoes to brush her mouth against his.

“It’s alright,” she murmured, pleased as his hands dropped and shoulders relaxed.

Hermione kissed him again, brushing back the hair from his face, drawing his lower lip into her mouth. He groaned, the sound both needy and pained, hands delicately caressing her waist as if he didn’t trust himself to do much else—just like that night they’d consummated their bond. Her teeth grazed the swell of his bottom lip and another groan rumbled through his chest, his hands tightening on her waist until he was walking them back to the bed.

The mattress hit the backs of her thighs and she shifted, lifting one knee then the other, holding onto the back of his neck to keep their kiss until he followed. And when they were both kneeling on the bed, she laced her arms around his neck, pressing her chest to the wide expanse of his scarred one. Close, so close, for the very first time and Hermione only wanted to be closer, wanted to be the magic in his veins, the breath in his lungs.

Draco's hands wandered, sliding lower to trace the curve of her ass before skimming up to draw a knuckle beneath the underside of her breast. Each touch was a revelation, a shiver, a drop of pleasure in an unending ocean that they would swim together. His cock jumped against her belly, smearing his need across her skin, and she knew he was unable to stop himself when he thrust against her. Slowly, she pulled them down until they were laying on their sides.

He cradled her face in his hands, the kiss becoming heartachingly sweet, thumbs stroking the line of her jaw. But her body was burning and she needed the ache and stretch of him the way she knew she needed her next breath. Slow enough as to not startle, she reached between them, wrapping her hand around his cock and guiding it to her core, sliding it against her clit. His hands tensed against her face, moving to her shoulder and chest.

"Hermione…" he moaned with furrowed brows.

"Look at me," she whispered, touching his cheek with her free hand while she continued to rub the tip of his cock through her wetness. "Draco, love, look at me."

His eyes flew open and the terror was there, written across the inky black of his pupils. She smiled and wished in that moment that she was a Legilimens. That she could jump through the space between them to fight whatever demons haunted him, to bandage the wounds bleeding through his mind. Instead, she leant forward, pressing a chaste kiss to his lips before draping her leg across his hip, opening herself further for him.

"I need you," she murmured against his lips.

Draco exhaled, one hand sliding down her chest to brush his thumb against the rose peak of her nipple. "I don't know if I could stand it…"

Hermione frowned. "Stand what?"

"Taking you again only to lose you. I'm afraid…" He blew out another breath. "I'm afraid that I won't be able to let go."

Her heart gave another painful twinge, corners of her eyes pricking at the grief clinging to the corners of his lips, his eyes.

"Then don't let go."

They stared at each other for a long moment, some unspoken understanding passing between them. It shimmered faintly, like their marriage bond, though invisible to the naked eye. And then slowly, ever so slowly, Draco moved forward, sheathing himself inch by inch until their hips were flush and both were panting.

"I'm yours," Hermione breathed.

Draco withdrew slightly, then surged up again and again until his small strokes became bigger. Until he was gripping her hair and arching her neck to lick a stripe up her skin. He

rolled, pinning her beneath him as he increased his rhythm, teeth grazing her throat, her jaw, until his lips brushed her ear.

“Mine,” he answered, right before she fell apart.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Draco took Hermione one more time in the bed before gathering her into his arms and striding into his bathroom. Not even as he turned the taps on the shower did he let her go, stepping into the stall with her still bundled in his arms. They stood like that, holding each other tight beneath the warm spray until eventually her lips found his throat and he pulsed against her belly. Draco pressed her back gently to the tiles before sheathing himself inside of her. Hermione threaded her fingers through his wet hair as he breathed her name into her ear over and over, mixed with the word she thought he needed more than any other.

Hermione.

Mine.

Hermione.

Mine.

Eventually they left the shower and dried off. It was Hermione who guided them back to bed. She worried perhaps that he would pull away then, dive back into himself where that guilt and pain and darkness lived. But instead, he tucked her beneath his chin, draping her across his chest before Hermione summoned her wand and extinguished the lights.

“Do you want me to retrieve your wand for you?” she asked, voice soft.

His heavy exhale swirled her hair around her temples, arms tightening around her. “No… I don’t think I could stomach holding that wand again. Not after so many years… that wand belonged to a boy I barely know now.”

She nodded against his chest, listening to the uneven rhythm of his heart. They laid like that in the quiet for a long time, as he traced lazy circles down her spine.

“Where would you live if not England?” The question was a careful one, a tentative introduction to the conversation they’d had that evening.

Draco turned his head, lips brushing her brow. He didn’t answer her for so long that tension began to trickle through her veins and she wondered if she had broken the quiet, peaceful moment.

“France, I think,” he said finally and with that answer, her whole body sighed.

“I love France, though I’ve only ever been to Paris,” she said quickly. He was answering, which meant he was considering it — that fantasy future that could be theirs.

Draco hummed, though she could hear his mind whirring with all they'd said that night. And like a shadow, his fear slunk back into the room.

"Do you prefer the countryside or the city?" Another question, another breadcrumb to draw him back to her.

His lips brushed her forehead again. "The country, I suppose… My family owns a chateau in Alsace, though I haven't been there since I was small. It was a gift from my father to my mother back when they were first courting."

There it was again, swimming through her mind. An image of them seated on some veranda overlooking the countryside, Draco holding her hand in his as they sipped tea and Hermione read aloud. In the image, Draco's face was full and healthy, a few freckles splattered across his cheeks from his time in the sun, a smile curled around the corner of his mouth.

Hermione drew back, squinting to make out his features in the dark. "Could we visit?"

She thought he might have frowned and reached out to stroke the furrow between his brows. Catching her hand, he brought it to his lips, pressing a kiss to her palm.

"I'll need to get in contact with the family solicitor or rather… return his owls," he mumbled against her skin.

It wouldn't be easy on him; she wasn't foolish enough to think that this sort of upheaval wouldn't send him careening back into himself. But still, the idea was more tantalizing with each passing breath. Leaving England, setting up a new home together, a clean slate and fresh air to breathe—to heal.

Hermione didn't say anything else and when Draco realized she was allowing the conversation to close, he drew her closer, kissing her softly until that softness turned to passion and they lost themselves again within the rhythm of their bodies.

Kingsley arrived on their doorstep the next morning, parchment clenched within a trembling fist. Lottie showed him in with all the courtesy befitting the Minister for Magic, before appearing in the bedroom with a soft *pop*.

"Lottie begs your pardon, but the Minister for Magic is waiting in the parlor," she said softly, poking Hermione's forearm hanging off the bed.

She jumped, the heavy weight of Draco across her back pinning her in place, a flush heating her cheeks at the realization that they'd fallen asleep again with him still deep inside her.

But the little elf only beamed giving her a smug curtsey. "Lottie will tell the Minister that my mistress and master will need a moment, yes she will."

And before Hermione could even say a word, she disappeared again, the *pop* this time sounding much too satisfied.

She turned in his hold, Draco slipping out of her as he mumbled softly into the pillow, arms automatically tightening around her waist. Each time they came together the night before, he had been less hesitant than the first, but she still feared what sort of change it would bring in the cold light of morning. Softly, she stroked her knuckle down his cheek, between his brows.

“Draco,” she murmured. “We need to wake up.”

He started, jolting upright with a quiet shout. Hermione shushed him, reaching out a hand to touch his shoulder.

“It’s okay, it’s just me. You’re safe.” At her words, he softened, head hanging with his rapid breaths.

Gently she ran her hand over his back, scooting forward to press a kiss to his nape. His left hand tremored as he reached back for her, curling around her hip.

“Kingsley is here,” she continued after a moment.

All the tension returned in an instant, his grip on the edge of pain before he slowly released her. And then he nodded, blowing out a breath. Hermione kissed his shoulder one last time before sliding from the bed and moving to the connecting door.

“I’ll just get changed and come back in here to meet you.”

As quickly as she could, she threw on some clothes, resolving to ask Lottie to help move some of her things into Draco’s room. She was thankful she caught her reflection in the mirror, taking a moment to glamour the love bites that littered her neck and collarbones. But as she raced back into his bedroom, it was to find him still seated on the bed, staring off at a spot on the floor. His tremoring hands were opening and closing in his lap, that muscle feathering in his jaw.

“Draco…”

Rounding the four poster, she climbed on in front of him, heart clenching painfully. This time she didn’t touch him, instead interlacing her fingers tightly and squeezing them in her lap.

“Would you prefer me see Kingsley alone?” she asked, keeping her voice as soft as possible.

That muscle in his jaw twitched again before he shook his head. “No… just—just give me a moment.”

With a frown, she murmured her understanding, smoothing her face right before he looked at her. Gingerly, she touched his cheek, waiting for the flinch only for him to lean into her fingertips.

“Shall I go downstairs and meet him while you get ready?”

Draco nodded and though every instinct in her said to stay, to gather him up in her arms and never let go, she slid from the bed and made her way out and down the stairs. The sitting room Kingsley waited in was right off the traveling parlor, outfitted in dark purples and

silvers. He stood at the window with his hands behind his back, parchment clutched tight, staring out into the grounds and the far off quidditch pitch.

“Hello, Kings.”

He turned, smudges of deep bruises beneath his eyes from a sleepless night. “Hermione, thank the gods. Where is he?”

“He’s upstairs, but he’ll join us shortly.” She gestured towards one of the four chairs gathered around the hearth, a small table before it outfitted with tea service. “Please, have a seat.”

But Kingsley shook his head, crossing to press the parchment into her hand. “Do you have any idea what he’s done?”

She unrolled it, noting the jerky calligraphy that was nothing like the beautiful loops of Draco’s childhood breeding. But she read the letter, swallowing twice and blinking back the burn in her eyes. Of course he had done it, she never doubted for a moment that Draco had truly sent the letter to Kingsley, but to see it, to hold it in her hands…

“He told me last night.”

Kingsley blinked at her. “Does he still want to go through with this?”

Did he still want to go through with it? Hermione frowned, looking back at the letter to buy herself time. Last night in his arms she was sure he didn’t — sure that today would be a day of planning for their departure. And yet his stillness this morning, the blank look in his eye. She opened her mouth to answer, then closed it again before looking up at Kingsley, who’s face reflected a similar panic.

“No… I don’t,” Draco answered from the door, the rasp of his voice a balm for raw edges of her nerves.

He made his way slowly into the room the way a scared dog might, each step calculated, his eyes not fixed on the Minister, but on Hermione. The clothes he wore were another combination of trousers and button down, though she noted that he’d buttoned the sleeves with silver cufflinks rather than roll them up. His hair was pulled back from his face and she noted the life in his eyes with relief.

At his words, Hermione expected Kingsley to visibly relax, but he stiffened further until his body vibrated with tension.

“Sit, Kings, before you give yourself a heart attack,” she urged.

But Kingsley only watched as Draco reached her side, standing close enough that his shoulder brushed hers, though he didn’t reach for her. And then he pivoted ever so slightly, orienting his body in her direction as if she was the sun he might orbit.

“Please, Minister, have a seat,” Draco invited, a flicker of the gentleman he’d been raised to be flashing before them.

Finally, Kingsley nodded, all but falling into one of the chairs. Draco placed a light hand on her low back, guiding her towards another, the tremor more pronounced than it had been that morning. When Hermione took a seat, she was surprised that Draco didn't, instead choosing to stand beside her chair, a hand on the back and while his gaze flickered between Kingsley and the door.

"I find there is no delicate way to say this," Kingsley started, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his thighs and looking up at Draco. "If you do not wish to be brought into the Ministry, I think it would be in your best interest—in *both* of your best interests—to leave the country. Sooner rather than later. The attack on Hermione has not softened the public towards you but only fanned the flames of those who wish to see all Death Eaters brought to justice, regardless of their true innocence. If they were to catch wind that this letter had been sent to me—"

"What do you mean?" Hermione interrupted.

"No owl is ever secure and Draco did not place a privacy ward on the letter. Anyone could have read it before it got to my desk."

Her blood ran cold and above her, Draco stiffened, a small bit frost creeping into the corners of his eyes. Hermione reached up, gently slipping her hand through his icy one and squeezed.

"Then I think you're correct, Kings. In fact, just last night we were discussing that perhaps it might be time for us to visit Malfoy's home in France."

Kingsley let out a sigh of relief before leaning back into the chair. "Where in France, Paris?"

Draco cleared his throat and Hermione stroked her thumb across the back of his palm. "N—no, it's in Alsace. My family has a chateau on the outskirts."

"The wizarding community in that region is quite small," Kingsley offered with a nod. "Though from my understanding our French counterparts are much more forgiving. In fact, I have received quite a few missives over the years from a Céline Durand, one of their advocates within their law enforcement offices, demanding that you be released."

Then it was possible that they would be welcomed in France, that perhaps even the government would protect them from whatever the Wizengamot might dream up to bring Draco back onto British soil.

But that meant they would be unable to risk visiting for long periods, that perhaps it would be unwise to ever return to England again. Hermione tried not to think of what it might be like to never see London again, to miss milestones in their friends' lives. And then she thought of Draco alone in that cell for five years, counting down the days to his death.

"Draco?" she asked softly, squeezing his hand again.

He was gazing down at her, some of the panic from yesterday flattening his mouth and she could see his pulse fluttering in his throat.

“Is she in danger, if she stays?” he asked slowly, not bothering to look at Kingsley.

The Minister frowned, considering it. “I believe you both are, yes.”

Draco’s eyes squeezed shut, his hand shaking harder in hers. “And if I was to turn myself in?”

“I believe she would be in danger regardless, Draco,” Kingsley answered carefully. “A life is an awfully big thing to give up in fear.”

Hermione swallowed, throat clicking in the silence of the room. How long would he continue to consider that perhaps it would be better if he was gone? Weeks? Months? Years? Lifting their joined hands, she pressed a kiss to his knuckles, smoothing over the scarred skin with her free hand.

“I can arrange a portkey within the next day or so,” Kingsley continued, now looking at Hermione. “And I’ll send an owl to Céline before I leave here, perhaps there are resources she can offer you as well.”

She nodded at Kingsley, though her attention continued to wander back to Draco who still stood with his eyes shut, rigid as stone.

“Breathe, love,” she murmured. Draco’s nostrils flared with his first breath, shoulders relaxing just a fraction with the exhale. “Would you give us a moment, Kings?”

Kingsley stood, nodding and running a hand over the front of his robes. “Of course.”

“Lottie,” Hermione called softly, nodding towards the Minister as she appeared. “Would you be so kind as to show the Minster of Magic to the study so he might write a letter?”

The little elf nodded enthusiastically, guiding Kingsley out the door with an imperious wave of her hand, chattering about the history of the manor as they walked. When the door shut, Hermione rose, taking his face in her hands.

“Draco, look at me.”

Slowly, he blinked, gray eyes glassy. His hands rose to encircle her wrists, tugging her a step closer to him. She went willingly, sliding her grip from his face to around his neck, pressing her heart against his. The warmth of his sigh ghosted across her throat as he buried his face in her hair.

“I have been spending so much time speaking for you, making your choices. I want to make sure you have a say in this, too.”

Draco’s hand’s tightened on her hips, before he wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her tight against him. It wasn’t an act of desire or lust, but comfort. She rose to her tiptoes, slipping a hand through the loose hair left out of his bun.

“Do you want this? To move to France with me and start a new life?”

The silence didn’t surprise her, not anymore. Not when she’d lived within that silence now for over a month. She only stroked his hair softly, brushing her lips against his temple, patient for once in her life to wait for him to speak. But that did not mean that with each moment that passed, her fear didn’t grow. That she didn’t wonder if he might send the feeble foundations of that fantasy in her mind crumbling around her.

And her whole body—whole soul—sighed with relief, as Draco swayed into her, the word both a plead and a prayer:

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, I was very undecided up until this point as to whether or not it was gonna be an HEA. I almost didn't let Draco come downstairs, but I'm glad I did!

I can't believe we are almost at the end. Next week will be the final chapter (the epilogue) & that will be a wrap on probably my final dramione fic. Thank you so much for going along with me on this ride.

Epilogue: One Year Later

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The spring air was fragrant, fresh with the rain of the night before and heavy with the scent of flowers blossoming on the hillside. Hermione was tucked into one of the chairs on the veranda, a book balanced on her knee, but she stared out into the rolling green vista, swathed in yellow and white.

A tray floated down on the small table in front of her, outfitted with two steaming tea cups and scones, before a blanket was draped over her shoulders and tucked around her.

“Here, love,” Draco murmured, pressing a kiss to her cheek before taking the chair beside her.

Hermione sighed when his hand covered hers, warm in the crisp air. Their fingers laced together lightly and she watched as he fixed their tea with intense focus before flicking his wand and setting a stasis charm over hers as she tended to take twice as long to finish her cup as he did.

They had been in Alsace now for almost a year and sometimes it was difficult to reconcile the wizard she left England with to the one who sat beside her now. The morning Kingsley arrived, urging them to move, Hermione finally encouraged Draco to reach out to his solicitor who, within the hour, appeared in their fireplace ready to make the necessary arrangements for the chateau to be cleaned and prepared for their arrival.

By the time Pansy, Theo, Blaise, Harry, and Ginny arrived at the manor, thinking they would all be sitting down to a quiet breakfast, a letter had already arrived from Céline Durand inviting both Draco and Hermione to the Ministry in Paris. All their friends sprang into action at the news, Pansy and Ginny providing a terrifying united front against Hermione’s clothing while Blaise contacted his own solicitor in France. Theo and Harry immediately pulled Draco into a conversation about quidditch and the potential for a pitch to be created on the grounds of the chateau.

Less than two days later their emergency portkey landed them at the visitor’s entrance for *Les Ministère des Affaires Magiques de la France*. Madame Durand—a willowy older witch with a streak of silver running through her black hair—waited for them with a polite smile and a stack of paperwork. Within the hour they were granted full magical citizenship thanks to Draco’s House of Black lineage and therefore untouchable to British magical law.

That was also when Draco discovered Hermione had changed her name to *Hermione Jean Malfoy.* He’d stared at her for so long Madame Durand left the small office, muttering something about ensuring their portkey would be ready for them, before he pressed Hermione against a wall, devouring her with a scorching kiss.

The chateau was slightly smaller than the manor, though no less imposing with its castle-like turrets and gorgeous stonework. But it had taken days for Draco to warm to the house he hadn't seen since childhood. He'd spent most of those days holed up in the small library, content to wrap himself in Hermione's warmth.

A month later Draco finally felt strong enough to brave wizarding Paris to buy a wand. But he'd raced to his hiding spot in the library for another day when they'd returned that afternoon, clutching his new rosewood and dragon heartstring wand tightly to his chest.

There were many hiccups in those first few months, some that sent Draco spiraling back to those nights when he'd been trapped in Azkaban, or even further back to the war. Three months in he agreed to meet with the healer Blaise's solicitor found.

Draco's face filled out, not into the sharp points of his youth, but into the strong curves of manhood. Muscles formed across his arms and chest from the countless hours he spent on his broom with Theo and Harry (who were finding more and more reasons to come to France — most notably because of their elopement only a few months after Draco and Hermione moved). Draco kept his hair long, though he most often wore it pulled back from his face, and Hermione could never quite resist the urge to run her fingers through it.

Time passed and with each day, the gaping wound across Draco's soul closed until only a scar remained. His tremors, though lessened, were permanent. They learned that after a rouge howler led to a particularly terrifying panic attack that landed Draco in the magical ward of Pitié Salpêtrière Hospital.

Even now, as Hermione watched him fix her tea on the veranda, his left hand shook ever so slightly.

"What do you have planned today?" she asked, stroking her thumb against his knuckles and eyeing the bed of Narcissa's roses in the far corner with speculation, wondering if it was time for another prune.

Draco shrugged, setting her tea in front of her carefully before taking a sip of his own. "Theo, Blaise, and Harry will be here this afternoon."

"Quidditch," she huffed with an eye roll, turning back to her book.

"Pansy mentioned she might drop by," Draco continued, taking another sip. "She has some news she wants to share."

Hermione grimaced at the pages. Whatever news Pansy had she wasn't quite sure if she wanted to hear it. Only two weeks ago she barged into Hermione's study, no hello, no pleasantries, just a graphic blow-by-blow breakdown of the drunken night she'd had with Ron and Oliver.

Draco refused to obliviate her no matter how sweetly she asked.

"But I thought this morning we could spend it together, just the two of us," he murmured, voice taking on a soft rumble that was nothing like the rasp from when she'd first met him.

She shivered, knowing what that tone meant, at the bruises he'd press into her skin and then kiss them sweetly after. Swallowing, she kept her eyes on the page, though she had read the same line three times already.

"All right."

His teacup clattered slightly as he put it down and she held her breath. Draco had truly blossomed in the last few months and his tentative, hesitant touches melted away into something Hermione thought she might be addicted to. He cleared his throat and she frowned a little at the slide of something across the table.

"Hermione," he said gently.

She looked up, brows raised. The morning light was soft on his face, catching on the silver in his irises. A soft blush crept across his cheekbones and his eyes had gone slightly glassy. And then she looked down at the table, at the velvet box in his hand, the opal and diamond ring glittering in that morning light.

Slowly, she closed the book, forgetting to mark her place, a shaking hand rising to cover her mouth. Her attention darted between the ring and his face over and over again, until Draco cleared his throat and drew out the ring from the box.

"You told me once that the Ministry had turned me into a symbol… that it was the reason why I was chosen as the one they lay their blame upon. And I think, after all these months, I finally understand a little bit of what you meant about someone becoming a symbol." He leant forward, taking her hand in his tremoring one. "Because for me, Hermione, you are a symbol of hope. You are the reminder that life does not have to be misery and darkness and death. I was so sure I had landed in the pit of hell, that the darkness was all I would ever know, and then you came in to that cell and showed me that it wasn't darkness at all—it was merely night."

Standing, he circled the table until he was in front of her, still holding onto her hand, and lowered to one knee.

"You brought dawn with you, a light so bright sometimes it hurts my eyes but it warms my bones at the same time. I love you, Hermione, and though I know we're already married, I feel like I'm finally worthy enough for you to truly be mine." He lifted the ring between them. "So will you accept this symbol of my love, of my devotion to you and this life we have built together?"

Hermione blinked away the tears that stung her eyes, obscuring Draco, so full of hope, from view. She nodded, a laugh bubbling up her throat.

"Yes, yes of course."

A smile broke across his face and he was right—it was the dawn breaking over the sky. Reverently, he slid the ring onto her left hand before bending to press a kiss to her knuckles. "I love you."

“I love you,” she breathed and then launched herself at him.

Draco caught her with an *oof* before she covered his mouth with hers, kissing him until they were breathless, until his fingers tangled in her hair and he took control of the kiss. She whimpered at the grip on the back of her head, at the way he angled her face so he could sweep his tongue into her mouth.

“My pretty little wife,” he murmured against her lips.

She moaned, rocking her hips against his lap. His soft laugh skittered against her skin and it only made her more breathless. Their sleep clothes were soft, barely a barrier between them and she moaned as the hard length of him rubbed against her clit.

“Yeah?” Draco licked a stripe up her neck. “Is that what my little wife wants?” But she shook her head, even as she chased her pleasure, soft whimpers dripping from her lips with each breath. “No? Then what is it she wants, hm?”

“M—my mouth on you,” she moaned arching her neck when his teeth bit into the soft skin of her shoulder.

He drew back with a brow raised. “That’s what you want?”

She nodded, excitement lighting her gaze. It was something he’d only recently been comfortable with, knowing now he wouldn’t hurt her the way he’d feared. And so, after another roll of his hips, he lifted her off and rose. With a graceful turn he settled himself in the chair she’d left, legs sprawled like a king on a throne.

“Then come and get it, love.”

Quickly, Hermione dropped to her knees, drawing down his sleep pants enough to free his cock from its confines. Then she pushed up his shirt, exposing the taut muscles of his stomach and leant forward to press a kiss to one hip, then the other, cock jumping each time it brushed her jaw, leaving behind a trail of pre-come on her skin. And then she wrapped her hands around it, licking the tip slowly and moaning at the taste of him.

“Fuck,” he moaned, running a hand down his face before gathering up her hair.

She grinned, swirling the crown with her tongue before softly sucking it into her mouth. His hips jumped, another curse rumbling through his chest and her belly clenched. Desire was already soaking through the thin lace of her underwear and she couldn’t stop the desperate way she squeezed her thighs together as she bobbed slowly up and down his length.

And then Draco moaned, head falling back onto the chair as his grip tightened in her hair, biceps flexing as he began to set the pace with that hold. Tears sprung in the corners of her eyes as he hit the back of her throat. But instead of jumping away as he had a few months ago, he only brushed them away gently with his thumb before sucking the salt from the pad to taste those tears.

“Look at you,” he growled, holding her head still as he fucked up into her mouth, using his shoulders on the chair as leverage. “So godsdamned beautiful taking my cock like this. Are you wet, love?”

She nodded the best she could but her moan was answer enough. One of his hands slipped to the back of her neck, caressing her tenderly as he continued to pump into her mouth.

“Of course you are, you’re always ready for me, aren’t you?” He moaned again, his voice dropping into that low rasp that sent sparks flying across her skin. “Touch yourself for me. Make yourself come while you choke on my cock like the good girl you are.”

Immediately she slipped her hand beneath her sleep shorts and soaked underwear, another moan vibrating through her throat and his cock as she pressed two fingers to her swollen clit. Stars burst behind her lids as she slid lower, filling herself with two fingers while she pressed the heel of her hand against where she needed it most.

“Eyes on me, darling, need to see it when you come.”

Blinking up at him, it was to see his cheeks flushed, a sheen of sweat across his brows, hair mussed around his face. His lips were parted, soft pants slipping through them as he fucked her mouth, muscles tensing in his stomach with each thrust. She came apart only moments later, held in place by his hands in her hair, riding her fingers through the aftershocks until he pulled her up and off his cock.

Hooking his thumbs into the hem of her shorts, Draco dragged them down her legs. She gave her shirt the same treatment before climbing onto his lap, the chair just wide enough to settle her knees on either side of his hips. The soft fabric of his shirt brushed against her breasts and she moaned before pulling it up and off him, throwing it to the floor.

Draco bracketed her throat with his wide hand, drawing her down to press his lips to hers, dragging his tongue across the seam of her lips. Hermione tugged the tie from his hair, running her hands through it before he drew back to kiss her jaw, her throat, pulling her up to graze his teeth across her breast before lapping at her nipple.

“Draco,” she moaned, reaching down to try to find his length, only to have it out of reach.

“Tell me what you want,” he murmured against her skin, moving to the other breast to give it the same treatment.

That was the way with him these days, he was desperate to hear what it was she wanted from him and desperate to give her everything she craved.

“Fuck me,” she demanded. “Please, don’t make me wait any longer.”

The grin that pulled up his lips made her core clench tight and he reached between them to draw two fingers up her center.

“So needy, my wife,” he crooned, before sucking his fingers into his mouth.

His lids fluttered at her taste and she took advantage, rocking back to grab his cock and sinking down onto it. They moaned in tandem, his hands flying to her waist while she steadied herself with a grip on his shoulders.

“Wait,” he hissed when she began to ride him. “Wait, love, or this will be over before it begins.”

That long length pulsed inside of her and she moaned, hips bouncing in needy little rocks as he kept her still, fingers digging into the soft flesh of her hips. Draco bit down on her shoulder and she moaned, head tilted back and writhing on his length. His tongue lapped at the spot and slowly, he rocked her, a low groan slipping through his teeth to ghost across her chest.

“Oh, *gods*,” she whimpered when he lifted her with that punishing grip before impaling her again on his cock.

“Look down, love,” he moaned, staring at where their bodies joined. Hermione leaned back, hands on his knees and peered down the length of her body. “Look how well you take me.”

Her cunt clenched and they let out a soft cry in tandem, bodies working frantically together, chasing the pleasure snaking through their veins.

“Going to fill you up.” The words were lower now, slipping from him almost unconsciously. “Going to cover you in my come until everyone knows you who belong to now—who *I* belong to.”

His name was a prayer on her lips as he slipped one hand between their bodies to stroke her clit. Magic sparked around them, the gold light of their bond shimmering between their chests. Hermione could see it now, see that bond that strengthened with each passing day until sometimes she thought she could feel his magic inside her, rippling through her like the orgasm that tore through her now.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Draco swore, bouncing her faster on his lap as she came.

She was pliant in his grip, an object of his need, his passion, his obsession, and she wouldn’t have it any other way. He came with a roar, slamming her down until he was so deep she felt his cock spasming with release, words whispered into her hair as their bodies stilled.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

And later, when they were breathless and lying in their bed, the afternoon sun streaming through the windows, Draco gathered her close as she lifted her hand to gaze at the ring that was now hers.

“I’ll never take it off,” she said sleepily. “I’m going to wear this forever.”

He kissed the top of her head, sighing with satisfaction.

“I think I quite like the sound of forever.”

Chapter End Notes

I can't believe it's officially over. I started writing Dramione back in June of 2022 with no expectations, just a story in my head that I wanted to get out. To say that this journey has been beyond anything I could have ever anticipated is an understatement to say the least. I don't know what the future holds for me in the fandom, if this is merely a hiatus or if I'll be stepping away forever, but if this is truly my final dramione fic, I can't think of a better one to end it on. *The Gallows* gave me an opportunity to put a voice to my own experiences with PTSD, trauma, caretaking, & grief. Thank you for going on this journey with me, for loving these characters as much as I do, for laughing, crying, and feeling right along with them. For now all my works will stay up & available on AO3 unless something happens which forces me to remove or private them.

Again, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for providing me a place to learn & hone this craft, to tell stories I could never have otherwise, & most importantly for your unending support. I hope you'll join me in this next chapter, but if not, It's been a pleasure providing these worlds for you.

xo — gillian eliza

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